



Navigating the Rapids: Directors Reflect on Their Careers and Professional Development

Paula Jorde Bloom

Discussions at state and national levels about credentialing directors focus our attention on the strategic role center directors play in ensuring high-quality early childhood services. While widespread consensus seems apparent that highly trained directors are critical for program success, there is more diverse opinion about how best to support directors in their professional development. Understanding directors' career decisions, their concerns, and their expectations can help inform this discussion and support sound decisionmaking as states implement director credentialing. This article explores career decisions and provides a framework for understanding the growth and development of director competence through the career cycle.

Becoming a director— Intention or improvisation

My interest in directors' career decisions was prompted by a cartoon that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* several years ago. It depicted an inquiring reporter asking a young woman why she wanted to become a mortician. "Because," she said, "I enjoy working with people."

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That cartoon sent me into hoots of laughter. Just a few days before, I had participated on a panel speaking about the joys and frustrations of directing a preschool before an audience of local high school seniors who were considering career options. One young woman in the audience had asked me why I decided to become a director, and, as you can guess, I replied, "Because I enjoy working with people."

People who enter early childhood education are usually idealistic and eager to improve conditions for young children. Often, though, they lack insight into their career motivations and do not have a well-conceived plan for achieving the professional experiences that will help them fulfill their career goals.

I recently conducted a study of 257 directors to gain some insight into the different issues that directors confront at varied points in their career cycle. These directors represented part-day and full-day schedules, nonprofit and for-profit programs in four states. The study includes in-depth interviews with 20 seasoned directors, who reflect on the course of their careers. These interviews provide rich anecdotes about directors' perceptions of their roles and their personal and professional growth. Listening to the directors' narratives, one hears both similarities and differences. The similarities often relate to career stages or the context of their work situations; the differences underscore the many ways in which their experiences have had a unique impact on them.

In *Composing a Life*, the author states that "the act of composing our lives is oftentimes improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather than pursuing a vision already defined" (Bateson 1989, 1). That also is clearly the case for early childhood directors. Less than one-fifth of directors report that they always knew they wanted to become a director of a center and actively pursued the position. In response to how they reached their current position, the largest percentage of directors indicate that others saw their leadership ability and encouraged them (often persuaded and coaxed them) to take the position. Shakeshaft (1989) found the same pattern in her study of women in administrative positions at the elementary and secondary levels.

Caffarella (1992) examines how the themes of centrality of relationships, the diverse and nonlinear patterns of development, and the continuing importance of identity and intimacy in women's development can be connected to the practice of women serving as leaders in organizations. These themes also are characteristic of early childhood directors. Caffarella believes that a "single linear pattern of psychosocial development appears to be almost the antithesis of what might be termed the 'norm' for women. Rather, women's development is characterized by multiple patterns, role discontinuities, and the need to maintain a fluid sense of self" (1992, 20).

The lack of a focused career path leading to a director's position is not

surprising given that the field of early childhood lacks a well-articulated career lattice or an established pattern of mentor relationships to provide guidance for those at different points in their careers. Approximately 90% of the directors studied report that they were teachers before assuming their first directorship; but few report that they had any formal administrative training prior to beginning their jobs as directors. For many, their own experience in the form of learning while doing was the most relied upon source for acquiring of management knowledge and skills. Only 32% report that they felt confident and self-assured when they first became a director. Seventy-nine percent indicate they were not prepared for the kinds of issues they encountered.

Directors' career cycles

A director's career cycle refers to that professional journey of change as reflected in the individual's competence, self-confidence, and actual behavior at different career points. Experience, along with continuing professional development, moves the director through various stages from novice to maturity. These stages reflect different concerns and expectations.

Considerable research exists on the career stages of preschool and elementary school teachers (Katz 1972; Krupp 1987; VanderVen 1988; Huberman 1989; Fessler & Christensen 1992) as well as elementary and secondary school principals (Kremer-Hayon & Fessler 1992; Bloom 1997). Little research, however, has focused on the career stages of early childhood administrators as a distinct group. Regardless, it is possible to draw on the theoretical literature of teachers' career stages to develop an understanding of specific issues characterizing directors at various points in their careers. Most applicable is the work of Fessler and Christensen (1992) who view the career cycle from a systems perspective. They believe that individuals move in and out of career stages in a dynamic ebb-and-flow response to personal and environmental factors.

Table 1 adapts the work of Fessler and Christensen to delineate six ca-

reer stages describing the experiences of early childhood directors: survival, competence building, enthusiastic and growing, career frustration, reflective and inspiring, and career wind down. This career-stage model should not be viewed as a linear progression from one step to the next. Not all directors experience all stages; some directors experience recurring cycles of stages as they move from one early childhood administrative role to another. Table 1 also summarizes the percentages of directors in each stage as reported by them.

Career-cycle development cannot be viewed as occurring in a vacuum, for it certainly is affected by where

individuals are in their adult developmental life cycle. Adult life-cycle development refers to those predictable and unpredictable passages that characterize adult growth and influence adult learning (Erikson 1959; Gould 1978; Levinson 1986; Levine 1989; Sheehy 1995). Age and phase theories of development are premised on the belief that there is a definable pattern and sequence to development. Where one is in the adult developmental cycle has an impact on how one interprets role-related issues and events. As Jepsen notes, a work career "is certainly embedded within life history, as one strand is entwined in a rope" (1990, 121).

Table 1. Percentage of Directors in Career Stages Delineating Their Experiences

Survival (7%)

I just try to get through the day without a major problem occurring.

I am striving for acceptance and attempting to achieve a comfort and security level in dealing with everyday management issues and problems.

Competence building (20%)

I am slowly improving my administrative skills and abilities.

I seek out new materials, methods, and strategies.

I attend conferences, workshops, and classes on my own initiative.

Enthusiastic and growing (38%)

I feel competent and confident in my role as director, but I continue to grow as a professional.

I am constantly seeking new ways to enrich my abilities.

Career frustration (7%)

I am frustrated and disillusioned with early childhood administration.

My job satisfaction is waning and I have begun to question why I am doing this work.

Reflective and inspiring (21%)

I have achieved a high level of competence and am perceived by my colleagues as a leader in the area of program administration.

I am a mentor to other directors.

Career wind-down (7%)

I am preparing to leave my administrative role.

I am looking forward to a career change or retirement.

Percentage of directors ($N = 257$) indicates the numbers who identified being in these six stages at the time of the author's study.

This framework is adapted from the work of Ralph Fessler and Judith Christensen. See *The Teacher Career Cycle* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1992).

An emerging body of feminist literature explores the distinct characteristics of the adult life cycle from a woman's perspective (Miller 1976; Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Peck 1986; Caffarella 1992). This body of literature draws attention to the centrality of relationships, attachment, and caring as central themes in women's adult development. Women do not try to compartmentalize their work lives from their personal lives; there is an overlapping of roles and concerns at all points in the adult life

cycle. As Levine states, "women bring their whole selves to work" (1989, 77).

In this study of directors, the metaphors they use and the personal stories they tell about their careers provide a rich source of data about the identity transformation that takes place over the career cycle. Table 2 summarizes the metaphorical themes that capture directors' personal career experiences. These experiences fall into four categorical characterizations: *a journey* (like going on a

road trip—lots of surprises, a few roadblocks and detours, but never a dull moment); *stretching, growing, and developing* (like an emerging butterfly—growing and changing in form and ability); *expanding horizons* (like climbing a mountain—every time I stop to look at the view, it is different and more breathtaking); and *challenging or fast-paced* (like navigating the rapids—the white water is exhilarating but sometimes terrifying; I need to be vigilant to the hazards around me so I don't capsize).

Table 2. Metaphorical Characterizations of Career Paths

My career as a director has been like . . .

a journey

- going on a road trip—lots of surprises, a few roadblocks and detours, but never a dull moment
- a sightseeing trip on a winding road through the country with lots of hills and valleys
- a never-ending road that is rough and smooth, curvy and straight, wide and narrow, and taking me to the place I want to go, with many rewarding stops along the way
- going through a large maze without a map to guide me—I encounter many twists and turns, often unsure where I am going exactly
- being on a road trip—I sometimes encounter heavy traffic, detours, wrong turns, and near-miss crashes, but I'm headed in the right direction
- a walk through a tropical rain forest—sometimes warm and rewarding, sometimes running into a wild animal

stretching, growing, and developing

- a Polaroid picture coming into focus
- learning yoga—at first twisting and stretching into positions and feeling uncomfortable, gradually becoming more flexible and adept and able to ease into positions without a problem
- a puppy who began with enthusiasm and misplaced energy, then went to doggy school and grew to be a loyal and helpful contributor to the family
- a sculptor creating a masterpiece out of a glob of clay
- a toddler learning to walk, run, skip, and jump

- a tree growing, which started from a little seed and with a lot of sunshine and rain has grown into a sturdy oak with lots of acorns
- stitching together a tapestry of experiences that have given me new confidence and competence
- an emerging butterfly—growing and changing in form and ability

expanding horizons

- climbing a ladder—with each challenging rung, I've grown, learned, and developed into a more competent professional
- climbing a mountain—every time I stop to look at the view, it is different and more breathtaking
- a skyscraper—each new floor offering new tasks and responsibilities

challenging or fast-paced

- navigating the rapids—the white water is exhilarating but sometimes terrifying; I need to be vigilant to the hazards around me so I don't capsize
- a Corvette—fast-paced and exciting!
- an amazing bestseller—each new chapter has brought exciting challenges and adventures
- being thrown into the ocean without a life jacket and—surprise, surprise—I became a swimmer
- ice-skating on a pond—usually smooth with a few stumbles and avoiding the holes and thin ice
- putting together a jigsaw puzzle—each new piece contributes to the picture of what I will become
- riding a roller coaster—the ups and downs are exhilarating and usually unpredictable
- being in a 5½-foot-deep swimming pool—whenever my feet touch bottom my head is underwater

Directors' concerns and expectations

In conceptualizing a director's career cycle, implicit is the belief that administering an early childhood program is a complex process in which expertise is gained over a period of time. Research on early childhood administrators has documented their concerns regarding specific job-related tasks (Austin & Morrow 1985; Bloom 1990), but these concerns have not been put into a developmental framework. Concerns and expectations of directors can be loosely grouped into three categories: the beginning director, the competent director, and the master director. In the study of 257 directors, approximately 30% describe themselves as beginning directors; 60% believe they fit the competent-director category; and only 10% report believing they are master directors.

The beginning director

The beginning director is filled with excitement and anticipation, eager to make a meaningful contribution. That excitement, however, is coupled with anxiety. Many directors identify with the term "reality shock" (Kramer 1974) in describing their reactions as they assume their first administrative position. Several circumstances shock them: the emotional and physical stamina required of the job, the amount of paperwork, the range and intensity of staff's and parents' needs, and the lack of support they often get from the center's administrative board or agency. One director, Crystal, now in her fourth year administering a program, reflects on her start:

I dreamed of the day I would be a director—to be the one "in charge." I really thought I was well prepared for the position. How naive I was! I really didn't have a clue about so many things. I survived that first year because of sheer determination, not because I was the least bit competent.

The picture Crystal describes, the literature refers to as "unconscious incompetence" (Howell 1986). She doesn't even know what she doesn't know, which is one reason why needs

assessments for novice directors are not very valuable. An individual needs a base of experience to begin to understand the knowledge and skill areas that need to be mastered. As beginning directors build a base of administrative competence during their first and second years on the job, they quickly move into a stage of conscious incompetence—being very aware of all there is yet to learn about the job's administrative demands.

Despite the need for guided entry into the early childhood administrative role, the sink-or-swim method of induction seems to prevail. One director notes, "I didn't know the difference between a debit or credit, yet I was responsible for a half-million-dollar budget that first year." Few states require any specialized training in management as a prerequisite for the director role. Most early childhood center directors are selected because of exemplary performance as classroom teachers, not because they have demonstrated competence in administration (Bloom 1990).

New directors in my study were found to have intense concerns regarding feelings of adequacy, their ability to handle the managerial demands of the job, and the desire to be liked and appreciated by staff and parents. They also have concerns about the quality and impact of their program, but when these concerns are probed deeper, they are usually couched in language relating to the directors' need to be validated, to be told they are doing a good job.

Reipe states another concern, "If you are the new kid on the block, or an old kid with a new hat, the existing group will initially view you and your actions with reservation and suspicion" (1996, 14). In my four-state survey, some directors who have been promoted from within talk about the instant isolation they experience once they assume their new administrative role. As one director states,

All of a sudden I was the enemy; no longer was I one of the group. It upset me so much when I walked into the kitchen on my third day as director and three teachers stopped talking. It really hurt.

These feelings are disconcerting to the new director who wants desper-

ately to be liked as well as respected. It appears that these feelings are not unique to early childhood administration. Duke (1988) heard similar anxieties expressed in his interviews of first-year principals. Fuller (1969), Veenman (1984), and Ryan (1986) provide accounts of similar concerns by new teachers.

Many, but not all, beginning directors have a survival focus—concerned with "just making it." These directors may be so preoccupied with whether they are personally adequate for meeting the multiple demands confronting them each day that they are unable to see beyond momentary exigencies. Many beginning directors are also concerned about status, their personal status in the organization, and their status in the field. The reason that a survival focus and status concerns do not uniformly describe all beginning directors is that many individuals moving into program administration are in their thirties or forties. The range of life experiences and the greater sense of self-assurance that accompany adult development may temper some of the insecurities that characterize the beginning director who is in his or her twenties.

The competent director

The competent director emerges after a period of competency building between one and four years into the job. Somewhere in this period the individual makes a subtle but important shift from struggling to juggling. The competent director is no longer concerned about merely coping. Rather, concerns seem to center on time (being able to accomplish all that needs to be done) and on meeting expectations (both externally and internally imposed). In other words, competent directors are not concerned about whether or not they can do the wide range of tasks demanded of them; they worry about how they can do them better.

The competent director has come to terms with two myths in program administration—that directors will be liked by everyone and that one right answer exists for every issue. They have also accepted the reality that hard work often goes unrecognized

and unappreciated and that the qualities that worked in making them a superstar teacher are not necessarily the same qualities that make a successful director.

Competent directors can be described as fitting Howell's (1986) "conscious competence" category of levels of learning. They are very aware of what they know and how they need to carry out the demands of their job. Balance seems to be a key issue for competent directors—balance between personal and professional obligations, balance between people and paper demands of the job, balance between meeting the needs of individuals and those of the organization.

The master director

The master director describes a small percentage of the 257 directors studied—experienced directors having moved to a higher level of reflection and competence in their administrative roles. These directors still worry about how they are going to juggle the multiple demands of their jobs, but they don't seem to dwell on the stressful aspects of their role. Master directors describe their centers from a systems perspective; they understand the nature of organizational change and the importance of their role as change agent. They are confident in their ability to handle virtually any curve ball tossed their way.

Master directors describe themselves most often as "role model," "advocate," "mentor," or "leader." Most important, they have the metacognitive ability to stand back and reflect on *how* they are doing *while* they are doing. They seem to under-

stand themselves well—their emotions and defense mechanisms as well as their cognitive strengths and weaknesses. The examples they give regarding administrative decision-making clearly illustrate affective neutrality—the ability to work with staff, parents, and the center's board with objectivity and tempered emotional involvement.

Master directors seem comfortable and confident in their personal leadership style. Many describe their conscious attempt to balance activities that require gathering, sharing, and analyzing information in linear ways (yang) with activities that involve creativity, emotional expression, and personal insight (yin) (Nagel 1994). Most important, they have developed a clear sense about role expectations and are able to communicate to their coworkers how they perceive the scope and nature of their administrative role so that role expectations are more compatible.

Master directors seldom talk in absolutes or look for quick-fix solutions to problems but rather understand that most issues surfacing in early childhood program administration are complex and can be viewed from multiple perspectives. They challenge the status quo by looking for new ways to solve old problems. They have the capacity for critical thinking—the ability to make a judgment and then qualitatively explain or defend that judgment.

Master directors see themselves as mentors to their teachers and to other directors. They see the connection between the developmental concepts and instructional strategies used with children and their work with adults.

As Virginia, an 11-year veteran of an NAEYC-accredited program states, "I look for those teachable moments with my staff, an opportunity to scaffold their understanding of an issue to a higher level of analysis."

Master directors are able to make explicit and to articulate their theories and beliefs about leadership, management, and their role in the process of organizational change. They reflect on and analyze the effects of their leadership style and apply the results of these reflections to future actions.

Like beginning and competent directors, master directors are also concerned about the diminishing pool of highly qualified staff, about the fact that there are too few hours in a day to do so many things, and about the public's perception of early childhood. They don't perseverate on these issues though. They understand the nature of organizational change and their own role in achieving long-term goals, both for their program and for the field of early childhood.

Master directors still are somewhat task focused but direct their primary concerns to the impact their program has on the lives of children, their families, and the community. These directors are both process and outcome oriented. They are fully aware of the many demands of their administrative role but will not compromise their expectation of excellence.

Growth and change over the career cycle

The developmental progression from beginning director to competent director to master director involves a shift in focus of directors' concerns and how they spend their time. Directors report they initially spend most of their time on the technical aspects of program operations—management concerns. The pace of activity in a center in terms of interactions, activities, and unanticipated interruptions provides precious little time in a typical day for a beginning director to reflect or even anticipate events. Directors report that they feel out of control initially. Gradually, as they build a rep-

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ertoire of competencies, they grow in self-confidence and are better able to prioritize their time to attend to the big issues having impact on program effectiveness. In the process of their development, the directors shift their attention to planning, vision building, and other leadership concerns. Along the way a gradual shift in attitudes occurs, from idealism to realism. Lofty expectations are dashed in exchange for How will they behave? and What will they achieve? Directors become more pragmatic in their expectations.

The process of change that characterizes the professional growth and development of individuals from beginning to master director appears as a spiraling funnel affected by formal and informal educational opportunities, experience, the context of development, and the sphere of relationships involved. These influences can be family, formal and informal mentors, or other significant individuals who serve to inspire, support, and promote deeper levels of self- and professional awareness during the career cycle.

The progression from beginning to competent to master director represents a transformation in the developing administrator that is far more complex, however, than the mere accumulation of new knowledge and acquired skills. It also represents a shift in thinking—the director's ability to think more abstractly about issues and events and to take alternative points of view, and an increased capacity for introspection.

A director's level of conceptual development directly affects the way he or she defines and solves problems. At a lower level of conceptual reasoning, individuals will look for single solutions to complex problems. They will often be dedicated to a single one-size-fits-all approach to management. Concrete thinking also tends to be accompanied by absolutism, categorical thinking, and a greater belief in external causality and an "oughtness" of rules. Individuals functioning at a higher conceptual level tend to be more adaptive in their administrative style, more flexible and tolerant, and better able to employ a wider range of administrative strategies in solving

problems (Harvey, Hunt, & Schroder 1961; Oja 1990).

Levels of conceptual reasoning also influence a director's capacity for perspective taking. Individuals performing at a lower level of conceptual reasoning will often interpret events and incidents from a personal perspective. They feel the need to change other people and can slip into patterns of blame and punishment. Such directors may expect staff to adjust to their style rather than flexing their style to meet the needs of their staff. Perspective taking involves tuning in to how others see the world and experience events. Perspective taking is a skill that is vital in healthy parent, staff, and board relations (Magnuson, Bachman, & Theunissen 1996).

Lasley (1992) believes that the content or substance of reflection also goes through a change as individuals gain mastery in their profession. Reflection on professional practice refers to the capacity of individuals to think creatively, imaginatively, and, at times, self-critically about what they are doing (Schon 1987; Smyth 1989). In the early childhood arena, directors' reflections usually begin with a technical focus as they examine the *how* of specific management practices and attempt to refine them. From here they move to a conceptual focus, striving to understand the theoretical basis for different practices and fostering consistency between an espoused theory ("I believe in participatory management") and actual reality ("Do I involve teachers in setting the agenda for staff meetings?"). At the highest level of reflection, directors engage in an actual internal dialogue about issues that influence their professional practice. They look critically at the ethical basis for what they do to determine how practices affect different constituents: children, parents, teachers, and the community ("Is a model of participatory management the most appropriate management approach, given the experience and maturity level of my staff?"). The emphasis becomes reflecting on the deeper philosophical issues of *why*, which provide the foundation for administrative practice.

Supporting directors through their career cycle

Developmental changes that characterize patterns of behavior and thought processes over the career cycle offer us broad insights into the way we might support the development of directors. If we expect adults to grow, we must create contexts that encourage and celebrate their development. Having a perspective about adult development and career stages can provide clues to the kinds of professional support directors might need at various stages in their development.

Although the beginning director's need for help is apparent, programs are few in which directors are supported throughout the first years in their administrative roles (Morgan et al. 1993; Bloom & Rafanello 1995). Discussions on developing a credential that delineates the desired qualifications for the director position are a hopeful sign of change. A director credential that specifies the knowledge and skills needed for making a smooth adjustment during the survival and competency-building stages of a director's career, if widely adopted, may help promote the emergence of preservice training programs for early childhood administrators.

Training and mentoring for directors at various stages should focus on different criteria: beginning directors need help with the technical and rudimentary aspects of the job to develop administrative competence before they begin to confront more complex and important issues of why certain administrative practices should be used. Involvement in directors' support groups is particularly useful for directors at this stage. Such support groups can provide a context for sharing and discussion.

Training and mentoring for competent directors should focus on the conceptual and theoretical aspects of program administration. Understanding the theoretical basis for organizational practice and fostering consistency between an espoused theory and reality are appropriate topics for directors at this point of their professional development. They need to see consistency between what they practice and what

they preach. They need to be able to defend what they do and articulate how center policies and procedures support program quality.

Competent directors often need help in learning how to delegate responsibilities to make work more manageable. They also benefit from support in balancing their personal and professional lives. In addition, recognition is important to competent directors. Opportunities to showcase their talents and accomplishments are important. Competent directors also need occasional downtime or short-term leave to rejuvenate themselves. Such experiences are essential for maintaining a long-term commitment to the field.

Master directors have a greater capacity for introspection. They can look critically at the ethical basis for what is happening at their centers and at the implications of decisions in terms of the immediate needs of children and their families as well as the broader societal goals. Avenues for growth, renewal, and enhanced professionalism for directors at this stage might include sabbaticals or grants that give directors the time and resources they need to expand their professional interests and contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Conclusion

Whitmyer stresses the importance of finding meaningful work and the Buddhist tradition of "right livelihood" and states that "Work is no less necessary for our emotional and physical health than food or shelter" (1994, 19). He believes that reflecting on what we do, how we do it, and why we do it will help expand and enhance our ability to find meaningful work. Self-awareness, reflection, and self-assessment are integral tools that facilitate this process. A fulfilling job has balance and diversity, coherence and fit. Bateson (1989) describes it as as much crafted as it is the result of a series of serendipitous decisions we make along the way.

By understanding the dynamics of the career cycle, we can be better prepared to assess what directors are experiencing and help them make career adjustments if necessary. Pro-

viding directors with the time and tools for introspection and reflection will help them understand that they are not the first to experience the insecurities of the survival stage, the pace and pressures of the enthusiastic and growing period, or the feelings of disillusionment encountered in a career's frustration stage. Knowledge about career stages and adult developmental milestones can better equip directors for navigating the rapids with skill and finesse and even enjoying the thrill of the adventure.

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