BUILDING DIRECTOR COMPETENCE: CREDENTIALING AND EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions at the state and national levels about director credentialing have focused attention on the strategic role that early childhood administrators play in the provision of high-quality services. Directors are the "gatekeepers to quality," setting the standards and expectations for teachers and other staff to follow. Although there is wide-spread consensus that highly trained directors are essential to program success, few institutions of higher education have addressed this need by offering degree programs specifically designed for center directors. Most often, specialized training for directors is collapsed into a single semester-length course covering all aspects of program management.

In 1998, National-Louis University launched a new graduate program in Early Childhood Administration to fill this void. The program meets the requirements of the newly developed Illinois Director Credential. The Master of Education (M.Ed.) option is designed for students who have a baccalaureate degree. The Certificate of Advanced Studies (C.A.S.) option is designed for students who already have a master's degree in education. The ECA program is an outgrowth of NLU's well-established field-based M.Ed. program in Early Childhood Leadership and Advocacy. That program attracts some center directors, but the student population is far more eclectic and also includes classroom teachers and other educators who work in a variety of roles. It is only available to students in the Chicago metropolitan area whereas the new ECA program is open to students across the country.

This article provides an overview of the Early Childhood Administration program. It describes the unique features of this program, core competencies, and key elements of the curriculum.

UNIQUE FEATURES

There are several characteristics of the Early Childhood Administration Program that will make it unique—the emphasis on collegial networking, the site-specific and problem-focused nature of the learning experience, the

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focus on action research and change, individualized support from instructors, and the flexible nature of the delivery model.

Collegial Networking

Because the professional role of early childhood director is often a lonely one, the Early Childhood Administration program weaves in ample opportunities for collegial support. There are powerful dynamics that can develop within a group of individuals who experience graduate study together. The collegial model creates an atmosphere of mutual trust that encourages the sharing of ideas and collaborative learning.

Collegial support is accomplished in three ways. First, as part of the degree sequence, students participate in *Taking Charge of Change,* a year-long educational experience that includes a six-day summer residential institute and two weekend retreats. (This fulfills two course requirements, ECE-525 and EPS-526.) Second, through electronic networking, students are connected to other directors. Finally, the instructional strategies in all courses are designed to foster cooperation and the exchange of ideas and insights.

Site-Specific and Problem-Focused Learning

One of the frustrations many adult learners experience in their formal education is the inevitable gap between the theoretical ideas they encounter in their studies and their ability to apply these ideas to their work. Course work in this graduate program rests on the assumption that immediate application of new learning to real-life situations reinforces what is learned. The Early Childhood Administration program emphasizes the links between theory, research, and practice in a useful and pragmatic way.

The examples used during class presentations relate to real issues and concerns that administrators face in their work settings. The program does not focus on theory alone, but rather weaves theory into the idiosyncratic issues that confront directors in their professional roles. Learning the criteria for achieving NAEYC center accreditation is an example of this application. Likewise, most of the course assignments are problem-centered and site-specific. Developing a strategic business plan for their centers is an example of this kind of application.

Action Research and Change

Throughout the program of study, students have an opportunity to be involved in action research. As part of *Taking Charge of Change,* they design a Program Improvement Plan and document their program improvement efforts. In the process they become not only consumers of research who study and apply the work of others, but also researchers themselves, creating knowledge and learning to think critically about educational ideas and practice.

The research emphasis in this program rests on the assumption that when educators engage in identifying and answering their most pressing questions, not only do they find important solutions, but their professional competence is enhanced. Helping directors define their role as one of change agent is crucial to instilling norms of continuous improvement in their programs. Directors need to build a vision for change, serve as the catalyst for change, create a climate that is conducive to change, and provide the resources necessary to implement change in healthy and constructive ways. This does not happen by chance. Exposing directors to different models of change and providing them with opportunities to build the skills necessary to make the change process successful is an essential component of this program.

Individualized Support

A key feature of the Early Childhood Administration program is the focused support students receive for personal and professional development. They are provided with ongoing academic support in writing, conceptual

development, and time and task management. As part of *Taking Charge of Change*, they have an opportunity to conduct an organizational climate assessment of their center and begin the self-study process of NAEYC center accreditation. Students who need individualized support in writing are also encouraged to enroll in ECE-582G, Writing and Editing for Effective Communication. This online course was designed to help them improve both their academic and business writing.

Flexible Format

Child care center directors lead extraordinarily frenetic lives. Most are married, have families, and juggle multiple commitments outside the workplace. The Early Childhood Administration program is premised on the belief that training should be offered in formats that are convenient for working professionals. Many of the requirements can be fulfilled by attending intensive weekend or week-long institutes. In addition, the program was designed to be convenient for students who live a distance from campus. Thus, many of the courses can be taken online.

CORE COMPETENCIES

The core competencies of the Early Childhood Administration Program fall into ten knowledge and skill areas. These are not discrete categories; there is conceptual as well as practical overlap. All are based on the knowledge base and ethical standards of the early childhood field. These competencies are also aligned with the Illinois Director Credential. A description of each competency area is followed by examples of applied tasks.

Personal and Professional Self-Awareness

Knowledge and application of adult and career development theory, personality typologies, dispositions, and learning styles.

Knowledge of one's own beliefs, values, and philosophical stance. The ability to evaluate ethical and moral dilemmas based on a professional code of ethics. The ability to be a reflective practitioner and apply a repertoire of techniques to improve the level of personal fulfillment and professional job satisfaction.

- developing personal goals to reduce stress and avoid burnout
- conceptualizing and articulating a philosophy of management
- seeking out professional resources to improve leadership effectiveness
- developing strategies to achieve a balance between personal and professional obligations

Legal and Fiscal Management

Knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of different legal structures. Knowledge of different codes and regulations including the Department of Children and Family Services' Licensing Standards; local building, zoning, and fire codes; regulations pertaining to occupational health, safety, and sanitation; and federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act as they relate to the delivery of early childhood program services. Knowledge of child custody, child abuse, confidentiality, antidiscrimination, insurance liability, contract, and labor laws pertaining to program management. Knowledge of different federal, state, and local revenue sources. Knowledge of bookkeeping methods and accounting terminology. Skill in budgeting, cash flow management, grantswriting, and fundraising.

- developing an annual budget that reflects program goals and objectives
- preparing a financial report
- developing a salary scale that reflects education, experience, and level of performance
- developing short- and long-range fundraising goals that support a program's mission.

- writing a grant proposal
- evaluating the cost effectiveness and appropriateness of different fundraising options

Staff Management and Human Relations

Knowledge and application of group dynamics, communication styles, and techniques for conflict resolution. Knowledge of different supervisory and group facilitation styles. The ability to relate to staff and board members of diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. The ability to hire, supervise, and motivate staff to high levels of performance. Skill in consensus building, team development, and staff performance appraisal.

- interviewing and hiring a new teacher
- implementing an orientation program for new personnel
- developing staffing patterns to reflect enrollment patterns
- conducting a staff meeting that promotes active involvement of staff
- mentoring, supervising, and evaluating staff
- implementing an individualized model of staff development
- implementing appropriate strategies based on adult development and learning styles

Educational Programming

Knowledge and application of different curriculum models, standards for high quality programming, and child assessment practices. The ability to develop and implement a program to meet the needs of young children at different ages and developmental levels (infant and toddler, preschool, school-aged). Knowledge of administrative practices that promote the inclusion of children with special needs.

- planning and implementing a child-centered curriculum
- implementing group practices that promote continuity of care
- implementing assessment procedures that include a developmental profile of each child
- designing instructional practices to meet the mandate for full inclusion
- implementing an antibias curriculum

Program Operations and Facilities Management

Knowledge and application of policies and procedures that meet state/local regulations and professional standards pertaining to the health and safety of young children. Knowledge of nutritional and health requirements for food service. The ability to design and plan the effective use of space based on principles of environmental psychology and child development. Knowledge of playground safety design and practice.

- designing, arranging, and equipping space to meet children's needs at different ages
- designing and arranging space to meet staff's and parents' needs
- developing a system to maintain accurate student and family records
- developing an inventory control system
- implementing a nutritional food service plan
- implementing emergency and risk management procedures

Family Support

Knowledge of family systems and different parenting styles. Knowledge of community resources to support family wellness. The ability to implement program practices that support families of diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The ability

to support parents as valued partners in the educational process.

- conducting a family-friendly audit of program practices
- planning educational experiences that meet the needs of diverse families
- maintaining an active system of parent-school relations
- implementing a program of parent involvement
- connecting parents to community resources

Marketing and Public Relations

Knowledge of the fundamentals of effective marketing, public relations, and community outreach. The ability to evaluate the cost-benefit of different marketing and promotional strategies. The ability to communicate the program's philosophy and to promote a positive public image to parents, business leaders, public officials, and prospective funders. The ability to promote linkages with local schools. Skill in developing a business plan and effective promotional literature, handbooks, newsletters, and press releases.

- conducting an assessment to determine community needs
- developing short- and long-range marketing/business plans to ensure full enrollment
- designing promotional literature
- giving a media interview
- writing a press release about a newsworthy event

Leadership and Advocacy

Knowledge of organizational theory and leadership styles as they relate to early childhood work environments. Knowledge of the legislative process, social issues, and public policy affecting young children and their families. The ability to articulate a vision, clarify and affirm values, and create a culture built on

norms of continuous improvement and ethical conduct. The ability to evaluate program effectiveness. The ability to define organizational problems, gather data to generate alternative solutions, and effectively apply analytical skills in its solution. The ability to advocate on behalf of young children and their families.

- guiding the board and staff in developing the center's philosophy and mission statement
- conducting an organizational climate assessment to improve the quality of work life for staff
- evaluating center practices and implementing a program improvement plan
- pursuing center accreditation
- mobilizing others to advocate for better child and family services
- initiating community collaborations for more efficient and cost-effective service delivery

Oral and Written Communication

Knowledge of the mechanics of writing including organizing ideas, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The ability to use written communication to effectively express one's thoughts. Knowledge of oral communication techniques including establishing rapport, preparing the environment, active listening, and voice control. The ability to communicate ideas effectively in a formal presentation.

- writing informal and formal business correspondence
- making a formal presentation at a board meeting or community forum
- presenting a workshop at a professional conference

Technology

Knowledge of basic computer hardware and software applications. The ability to use

TABLE 1
M.Ed. in Early Childhood Administration

Core Requirements (12 s.h.)

ESR506	Graduate Research: Interpretive/Critical	2
ESR507	Graduate Research: Empirical/Quantitative	2
FND505	Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Education	2
FND503	Historical & Philosophical Foundations of Early Childhood Education	3
EPS500	Contemporary Survey of Child Development	3
		12 s.h.

Program Requirements (16 s.h.)

ECE510	Child, Family, and Community	3
ECE512	Early Childhood Curriculum	2
ECE525	Strategies for Supervision and Staff Development	3
EPS526	Organizational Theory, Group Dynamics, & Leadership Applications	3
ECE515	Financial and Legal Aspects of Child Care Management	3
ECE593	Seminar/Early Childhood Education	2
		16 s.h.

6 s.h. of electives in consultation with advisor:

Courses

ECE534	Technology in Child Care Administration (2 s.h.)
ECE536	The Director as Child Care Advocate (1-2 s.h.)
ECE538	Individual and Organizational Perspectives on Adult Development (2 s.h.)
ECE540	Grantswriting and Fundraising for Early Childhood Programs (1-2 s.h.)
ECE542	Public Relations and Marketing of Early Childhood Programs (1-2 s.h.)
ECE544	Early Childhood Environments: Design & Facilities Management (1-2 s.h.)
ECE532	Advocating for Children with Special Needs (2 s.h.)
ECE594	Independent Study (1-3 s.h.)

Workshops

ECE582E	Implementing a Family-Responsive Program (2-3 s.h.)
ECE582D	The Administration of School-Age Child Care Programs (2 s.h.)
ECE582C	Early Childhood Program Evaluation (2 s.h.)
ECE585R	The Reggio Emilia Approach (1-3 s.h.)
ECE584A	ECE/Multicultural and Anti-Bias Education (1 s.h.)
ECE582F	ECE/The New Director (2-3 s.h.)
ECE582G	Writing and Editing for Effective Communication (1 s.h.)

	6 s.h.
Total	34 s.h.

the computer for child care administrative functions.

- developing criteria for choosing hardware, software, and peripherals
- composing and editing a memo on the computer
- using graphics software to design and edit a newsletter or brochure
- using a spreadsheet to construct a budget or summarize data
- communicating by electronic mail
- accessing early childhood resources via the Internet
- linking to advocacy and professional development resources

THE CURRICULUM

Table 1 provides an overview of the course requirements for the Early Childhood Administration M.Ed. program. The program includes 34 semester hours of course work that

can be completed in as little as two years or stretched out over six years. The curriculum rests on three philosophical tenets: 1) effective administrators are also effective educators; 2) effective administration requires a systems perspective; and 3) the process of graduate study (i.e., how the curriculum is constructed and taught) can also be a powerful influence in promoting the leadership development of early childhood directors.

Effective Administrators Are Effective Educators

In order to be an effective administrator of an early childhood program, directors need a solid knowledge base in the areas of child development, early childhood curriculum, discipline and guidance, family systems, assessment, social and cultural diversity, and professional ethics. Most students will have developed this foundation during their undergraduate education and during prior on-the-job experience. The course sequence for this graduate program provides for both a review and a higher level understanding of these core concepts through several required courses (FND-503, EPS-500, ECE-510, and ECE-512).

Effective Child Care Administration Requires a Systems Perspective

Early childhood programs do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by funding and regulatory agencies, the current social and political climate, professional organizations, and a host of other external influences that act as both opportunities and constraints to program effectiveness. Becoming an effective director means taking a broader systems view of the program and understanding the delicate interplay between the center and its external environment. Thus, the curriculum of this graduate program examines how the formal and informal structure, key stakeholders, organizational processes, and the unique culture of each early childhood setting interrelate to impact program outcomes.

The Process

Central to the conceptual framework of the Early Childhood Administration Program is an emphasis on *process*—the range of academic experiences that comprise the student's graduate study and promote personal and professional growth. The curriculum is designed to model the collaborative and participative processes it is hoped students will take back to their respective early childhood programs. This means providing them with a voice in the design, structure, and delivery of content. This model of an emergent curriculum is premised on the belief that there are many ways to achieve desired outcomes. When students are active agents in constructing key experiences for their professional growth, their investment in the learning process is heightened.

Fundamental to this process is the belief that attitudes and dispositions are just as important as knowledge and skills. Desired dispositions include: flexibility; seeing oneself as a growing, evolving professional; respect for diverse beliefs and opinions; receptivity to new ways of thinking; valuing parents as active partners in the educational process; and feeling comfortable with the disequilibrium that accompanies new learning.

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

As with any academic program, issues have surfaced regarding how to attract a sufficient student enrollment to ensure a financially viable program and still deliver and maintain high quality instruction. This dilemma is particularly thorny for the ECA program because most child care center directors have limited financial resources to afford graduate study. The University's Center for Early Childhood Leadership has been particularly helpful in this regard. The Center provides grant-funded training for directors and has coordinated its efforts with the ECA program so that students who are interested in pursuing graduate study but cannot afford it can obtain some financial relief through the Center's grant-funded initiatives.

As the program expands nationwide, issues in advising and academic support will also need to be addressed. The cohort model is an efficient delivery model, but as the course sequence becomes more prescriptive to accommodate the needs of the cohort, the ability to tailor courses to different director competency levels may be compromised. Care will need to be taken so that directors who are novices in the field continue to receive different support from those who are seasoned master directors.

Finally, as director credential models are implemented in other states, it will be necessary to establish reciprocal agreements regarding the director competencies achieved through the Early Childhood Administration program and those established in other states. Changes will also need to be made in the course sequence to address new developments in the field and to ensure that program graduates are prepared to administer programs that meet the needs of children and families in different communities.