

## Professional Orientation: Individual and Organizational Perspectives

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**ABSTRACT:** This study looked at professional orientation from two perspectives—the individual and the early childhood center. The sample included 831 child care workers representing 85 center-based programs in 20 states. The results of the data analysis revealed that there were statistically significant differences in the level of professional orientation of early childhood workers that corresponded to their role in the organizational hierarchy. It was also found that centers differed in their degree of professional orientation and that these differences were related to center size, legal structure, and program type. The profile of early childhood workers that emerged from this study extends our understanding of the professional attitudes and behaviors that characterize individuals who hold different positions in the center. It also provides clear evidence of the structural components of programs that correspond to differential levels of professional orientation.

Improving the status of teaching as a profession has been a reoccurring theme in school reform proposals during the twentieth century. The latest wave of recommendations is no exception. Considerable attention has focused on defining the characteristics of a profession and developing a blueprint for transforming the nature of teaching into full-fledged professional status (Banner, 1985; Carnegie Forum, 1986; National Commission on Excellence, 1983; Ornstein, 1979). Early childhood educators, as well, have combed the sociological literature in an effort to clarify the nuances in the occupational descriptors associated with the professions and semi-professions. Out of these efforts have come a number of noteworthy recommendations for improving the status of workers in early childhood settings (Ade, 1982; Austin, 1981; Becker, 1975; Caldwell, 1983; Ferguson & Anglin, 1985; Hostetler & Klugman, 1982; Jalongo, 1986; Katz, 1984; Lindsay & Lindsay, 1987; NAEYC, 1984; Spodek, Saracho, & Peters, 1988).

Few proposals, however, have wrestled with the thorny issue of how to measure the attitudes and behaviors associated with professionalism. Over twenty years ago Corwin (1965) proposed an approach that might be worth resurrecting. He used the term "professional orientation" as a role perception variable to describe the behavior of individuals in different settings. According to Corwin, a professional orientation is charac-

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terized by an individual's emphasis on growth and change, skill based primarily on knowledge, autonomy in decision-making, a reference-group orientation, the achievement of goals, and loyalty to clients and professional associations.

If we acknowledge, however, that behavior is influenced by both the personal background of the individual and the context in which that person works (Lewin, 1931; Moos, 1976), perhaps a broader interpretation of professional orientation is needed—one that looks at both the professional orientation of the individual and the professional orientation of the organization. Extending the construct to describe both an attribute of the individual and an attribute of the organization begs the question: In what activities does the individual (or the organization) engage that promote professionalism?

For those seeking to better understand the complex relationship between worker and workplace in the early childhood setting, this approach invites a host of related questions that merit attention. The present study focused on just two of these questions: How do differential levels of professional orientation relate to the individuals' role in the center? And, what aspects of program structure are related to the professional orientation of the center?

### Caregiver Roles

The lack of a uniformly-accepted nomenclature to denote personnel who work in early childhood programs has always plagued the field (Hostetler & Klugman, 1982; Phillips & Whitebook, 1986; Spodek, Saracho, & Peters, 1988). State licensing standards reflect the lack of consensus about role definition (Morgan, 1987). Many states do not differentiate personnel working in child care settings and refer to all as "child care workers." A few states, however, do define a second level of teacher more highly qualified in child development than the rest of the teachers. Only a small number of states, though, provide specific guidelines for individuals assuming the role of director (Jorde-Bloom, 1990).

Over the past several years there has been a move to achieve greater consensus on role definition for early childhood workers. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1984) has proposed nomenclature guidelines with corresponding qualifications, competencies and responsibilities for four levels of early childhood personnel: teacher assistant; associate teacher; teacher; and early childhood specialist. In practice, however, these guidelines have not been widely adopted. Few programs use the term "associate teacher" and most program administrators still use the title "director" instead of "early child-

hood specialist." NAEYC is in the process of revising its nomenclature statement to provide practitioners with guidelines on how differential roles and levels of responsibility can be tied to a career ladder model of professional advancement.

While some research has explored the effect of role on workers' level of job satisfaction, commitment, and perceptions of working conditions (Goodman, Brady, & Desch, 1987; Jorde-Bloom 1988b; Kontos & Stremmel, 1988), little systematic study has been done investigating workers' level of professional orientation as it relates to role. One noteworthy exception is a study conducted by Powell and Stremmel (1988). In their study of 533 early childhood workers, they found different patterns of training and experience related to role as well as to differential levels of professional development. Powell and Stremmel conclude that child care work experience is not a substitute for formal child-related training in developing a professional orientation to career development.

### Structural Components of Early Childhood Programs

While the structural components of organizations have been defined in a number of different ways in the reorganizational management literature (Katz & Kahn, 1978), the three components of organizational structure that appear to have particular relevance to early childhood settings are: center size, legal structure, and program type.

#### *Size*

Research on the relationship between organizational size and various outcome variables has been both extensive and inconclusive. Moos (1976) concluded that organizational size per se did not have an immediate impact on behavior. He stressed that organizational variables such as size are not psychological variables which bear directly on individuals. They are only important because of their effect on the attitudes and values which do bear directly on individuals. Large size, for example, can affect collegiality which may have an adverse impact on perceptions about organizational practices. Talacchi (1960) believes that increased size increases the division of labor and status differentiation in organizations. He concludes that the size of an organization directly affects the individual by changing both the nature of the job and the nature of interpersonal relations on the job.

Studies exploring the impact of size on early childhood program outcomes have used a variety of different indicators for center size including total square footage of the facility, student enrollment, and licensed capacity. Most of the studies in this area, however, have looked at the

issue of density and its effect on child outcomes rather than how size relates to indices of professional orientation.

### *Legal Structure*

The legal structure of a center describes its governing framework. Nonprofit centers may be public (receiving over 50% of their operating funds from state or federal sources) or private (affiliated with a church, local social service organization, or independent). The most common for-profit legal structure is the sole proprietorship (also called private proprietorship). Another for-profit variation is the general or limited partnership (often a husband and wife team). The fastest-growing segment of the for-profit sector by far, however, is the for-profit corporations that provide child care services (Neugebauer, 1988). These are usually chains (e.g., Kinder-Care, Children's World) operated under a single corporate management, but also include some day care franchises. Currently about half of the licensed day care centers are under for-profit auspices (Kahn & Kainerman, 1987).

In the early 1970's when big businesses rushed to establish for-profit centers, educators from the nonprofit sector were often vocal in their criticism of these programs. Even writers in the popular press questioned the trend, fearing we were at risk of rearing a generation of "Kentucky Fried Children." The national Council of Jewish Women (Keyserling, 1972) fueled the fire when it reported the results of its study investigating several indices of program quality. It rated almost 50% of all the proprietary for-profit centers it studied as "poor" compared to 11% of the nonprofit centers. The study got enormous press and helped shape many stereotypes about for-profit programs.

Even though there is a recognition that nonprofit and for-profit programs all represent a spectrum of quality, a growing body of evidence suggests that there may be significant differences in the organizational indicators associated with professional orientation. Kagan and Glennon (1982) reported for-profits consistently spent 10% less of their budget on wages compared to nonprofits. Whitebook, Howes, Darrah, and Friedman (1982) also found staff in proprietary centers earned significantly less and had fewer benefits than workers in other private or public centers. Jorde-Bloom (1988b) found that although for-profits paid their employees somewhat less, this difference did not translate into differential levels of job satisfaction.

The relationship between legal structure and overall program quality has also been investigated in several studies. Kontos and Stremmel (1988) reported significant differences in quality between for-profit and nonprofit centers. Kagan and Newton (1987), as well, found that the government-funded nonprofit centers included in their study concis-

tently scored higher in positive adult behaviors and other indicators of quality than private nonprofit centers or for-profit programs.

### *Program Type*

Program type describes the kind of service provided with respect to the length of day of the children's program. It is also an indirect measure of the amount of contact time staff have with children. Programs vary considerably in this regard from providing single half-day programs of 2 - 2½ hours in length to full day care for ten or more hours.

Most of the studies related to program type have looked at different aspects of child adjustment, teacher-child interaction patterns, and parental expectations. Research investigating the effect of program type on indicators of professional orientation is quite limited. Zinsler (1986) found that half-day nursery school programs were characterized by higher hourly wage rates, more experienced and more highly educated staff, and lower turnover rates than day care centers. Whitebook and her colleagues, as well, found turnover rates were lowest for staff in part-time programs. Lindsay and Lindsay (1987) found differences in the educational background between workers in full-day and part-day programs with a far higher percentage of teachers and assistants at full day centers having completed four or more years of college.

### **Methodology**

#### *Sample and Data Collection Procedures*

The sample for this study included 831 early childhood workers representing 85 for-profit and nonprofit center-based programs in 20 states. The sample included 26 males and 805 females. To control for the effects of full-time versus part-time employment, only individuals were included that were employed a minimum of 35 hours per week. Of the sample, 242 were classroom assistants (sometimes referred to as aides), 473 were teachers or head teachers, and 116 held administrative or supervisory positions.

The 85 centers included in this study ranged in size from 20 to 336 students with a mean total enrollment of 92 students. Programs represented a broad geographic as well as urban and rural distribution.

The data for this study were collected and analyzed in 1987. Questionnaires were mailed to each participating center with directions for the director to distribute a survey and return envelope to each employee. Anonymity of individual responses was emphasized. The average response rate within centers was 90% of the total number of employees.

### *Instrumentation*

A five-page questionnaire was developed to measure the variables under investigation. In addition to eliciting information on the background characteristics of each respondent, the survey included questions to ascertain the following independent and dependent variables.

*Structural components.* Three indices of organizational structure were used: size, legal structure, and program type. Total student enrollment was used as a measure of size. This index was selected because it conveys more information about the number of families served (and probably more information about the complexity of the program) than does a single figure of licensed capacity. Subjects were also asked to indicate one of three legal structures that best defined their program: public nonprofit, private nonprofit, and for-profit. Finally, programs were grouped into one of four categories: half-day (two 2½ hour sessions); half-day (one 4 - 5 hour session); full-day; and full-day with a half-day option included in it. The half-day programs did not exceed 5 hours of contact time with children. All full-day programs provided child care services a minimum of 8 hours.

*Professional orientation—Center.* In assessing this variable, the individual center was the unit of analysis. This scale measured the policies, practices, and regular activities of the center that support professional growth, teacher involvement in decision-making, and role clarity. Because teachers and administrators often have different perceptions of what is going on in center (Jorde-Bloom, 1988a), all employees were asked to complete the questions about the organizational practices that related to the center's professional orientation. When there was at least 80% agreement by employees that the center engaged in the particular activity described, it was assumed that the item accurately reflected organizational practices and the item was counted.

In all there were 25 possible points for this scale. An analysis of the internal consistency of the scale items (Cronbach's Alpha) yielded a coefficient of .68.

*Professional orientation—Individual.* Drawing on previous research on the topic (Corwin, 1965; Etzioni, 1969; Houle, 1981; Jorde-Bloom & Ford, 1988; Lieberman, 1956), this scale included questions regarding individuals' perception of their work ("Do you consider your work just a job or career?"), their involvement in pursuing advanced studies; and degree of affiliation with professional organizations. Clearly, one of the most important indicators of a professional orientation is one's commitment to the client. Asking questions directly about commitment typically produces socially-desirable responses, however. To circumvent this problem, client commitment was inferred from the

subject's responses to questions that targeted specific behaviors indicative of commitment. For example, subjects were asked if they engaged in any advocacy activities related to children's issues.

In all there were a total of 20 possible points for this scale. An analysis of the internal consistency of the scale items (Cronbach's Alpha) yielded a coefficient of .70. The correlation between the professional orientation (indiv) subscale and the professional orientation (center) subscale was  $r = .01$ ,  $p < .85$  indicating that the items comprising each of the scales were relatively independent.

*Organizational commitment.* Organizational commitment measures the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization. Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) as well as Dworkin (1987) emphasize that commitment is characterized by at least three related factors: (1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; (2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization.

Drawing on previous research on the topic as it relates to the context of early childhood education (Berk, 1985; Jorde-Bloom, 1982, 1986, 1988b; Kreuger, Lauer, Graham, & Powell, 1986), individuals were asked 10 questions relating to their commitment to the center. Five questions were worded positively, five negatively. Scores ranged from 0 to 10 indicating low to high commitment to the center. Internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha) for this scale was .65.

## Results and Discussion

### *The Professional Orientation of Individuals—A Profile*

Much of the previous research in the area of professionalism in early childhood education has treated child care workers as a collective identity, referring to them as though they were a homogeneous occupational group. But research that relies on measures of central tendency to report background characteristics and outcome variables of the group as a whole mask the enormous variation that exists among workers in this field. The results of the present study underscore the importance of not referring to early childhood educators as a single reference group. Indeed, the occupation may be more stratified than previously assumed.

Table 1 provides a summary of means and standard deviations of the background characteristics, level of professional orientation, and organizational commitment of the 831 individuals included in this study. Data are also presented according to the worker's role in the center.

**TABLE 1**  
**Means and Standard Deviations of Background Characteristics, Professional Orientation, and Organizational Commitment by Role**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
<i>Assistants (N=242)</i>		
Age	29.25	11.24
Education level*	2.15	1.09
Years in ece	3.95	4.22
Years at center	2.55	3.27
Prof Orientation	3.11	2.28
Commitment	6.79	1.68
<i>Teachers (N=473)</i>		
Age	32.79	9.65
Education level*	3.44	1.41
Years in ece	6.19	4.96
Years at center	3.62	3.77
Prof Orientation	4.86	2.72
Commitment	6.82	1.68
<i>Directors (N=116)</i>		
Age	36.74	9.27
Education level*	4.53	1.76
Years in ece	9.67	6.20
Years at center	4.91	4.87
Prof Orientation	8.34	4.13
Commitment	7.49	1.42
<i>All (N=831)</i>		
Age	32.35	10.34
Education level*	3.24	1.58
Years in ece	6.03	5.26
Years at center	3.49	3.88
Prof Orientation	4.90	3.31
Commitment	6.91	1.66

\*level 1 = high school diploma; 2 = some college; 3 = Associate of Arts (AA) degree; 4 = Baccalaureate degree; 5 = some graduate work; 6 = Master's degree; 7 = Post master's work; 8 = Doctorate (Ed.D/Ph.D)

Analysis of variance procedures were employed to discern if there were statistically significant differences between assistants, teachers, and directors in their background (age, education, years in ece, years on

the job), level of professional orientation, and commitment to the center. In each area strong statistically significant differences were noted ( $p < .001$ ). In both professional orientation and organizational commitment, the differences were quite strong (professional orientation,  $F(2,723) = 118.95, p < .0001$ ; organizational commitment,  $F(2,734) = 7.40, p < .001$ ). As noted on this table, the differences corresponded directly to the individual's hierarchical role in the center. Only 59% of the assistants, for example, versus 87% of the directors perceived their work as a career. Directors of programs had more formal education, more experience, and exhibited a stronger professional orientation and greater commitment to the center than teachers. Teachers in turn scored higher on these measures than assistants.

Pettygrove and Greenman (1984) believe there is not a clear shared definition of the meaning of professionalism for work in early childhood education. Lacking well-articulated professional standards, child care staff typically define professionalism in terms of the perceived importance and responsibility associated with their work rather than in terms of possessing a particular body of knowledge and skills.

Considerable research supports this "noble cause" self perception of professionalism. Several studies have found that early childhood educators perceive themselves as professionals, take their work seriously, and are committed to careers in child care (Berk, 1985; Jorde-Bloom, 1988b; Lindsay & Lindsay, 1987; Pettygrove, Whitebook, & Weir, 1984). Virtually all of the studies cited give early childhood educators high marks for their dedication and commitment to the field. But most of previous research on the topic embraces a narrow definition of professionalism, one that rests on self-perception as a sole criteria. Professionalism is thus equated with the extent to which child care workers exhibit the attitudes of professionalism—belief in the importance of their work, long-term commitment, and a sense of autonomy in performing it (Lindsay & Lindsay, 1987).

But is self-perception enough? If one takes a broader view of professionalism, defining it instead as one's professional orientation (having both an attitudinal and behavioral component), than early childhood educators may come out with a different sort of report card. The results of the data analysis in this study suggest that early childhood educators have a long way to go before their behaviors match their perceptions of themselves as professionals. The extent of their involvement in professional activities was disappointing, to say the least. Not even a third of the teachers belonged to one professional organization or subscribed to a single professional journal or magazine. Only a third of the assistants were working toward a degree. And barely a fifth of the assistants and teachers had attended two workshops or conferences during the previous year.

There is clearly a discrepancy between self perceptions and reported behaviors in the area of child advocacy, as well. In a 1982 study of early childhood educators, Hostetler and Klugman report that nearly half of their respondents viewed themselves as child advocates. When the subjects in the present study were asked, however, if they had written even one advocacy letter during the previous year, only 9% of the assistants, 12% of the teachers, and 45% of the directors had done so.

Even though the overall level of involvement in professional activities was disappointing, it is clear that one's role in the organization impacts self-perception of professionalism. It is possible that as individuals increase their level of education and expand their repertoire of experiences, they go through a kind of perceptual shift, moving from a "noble cause" role perception of what constitutes professionalism to one that is defined more by their outward actions and behaviors. As individuals move up the career ladder, they engage in more activities that are characteristic of professionals. They subscribe to more educational journals, they attend more workshops and conferences, they commit more time over and above what they are paid for in planning and preparation, they write more advocacy letters, and they assume a greater leadership role in the profession by giving workshops and publishing articles.

### *The Professional Orientation of Centers—A Profile*

Overall, the early childhood programs participating in this study engaged in a number of activities that promoted professionalism. Two-thirds or more of the programs provided released time to attend conferences, encouraged staff to share resources regularly, had formal job evaluation procedures, conducted staff meetings at least once a month, had a staff manual and written job descriptions, provided parents with a handbook detailing policies, and distributed a monthly newsletter.

In an earlier study of center practices relating to professionalism, Hostetler and Klugman (1982) state that only 41% of the programs they surveyed had regular in-service education and only 28% provided tuition reimbursement for courses. While it is difficult to know how similar the sample in that study was to the programs included in the present study, it is encouraging to see that the percentage of programs responding affirmatively to these two categories improved; 61% of the programs surveyed in this study provided on-site staff development and 41% provided tuition reimbursement to employees taking college courses.

Even if programs have strengthened their professional orientation over the past few years, it was still disappointing to see less than half of the programs in this study provided employees with written contracts or had a library of professional books for their staff to use. Only a little more

than a third of the programs provided released time to visit other programs. And only 11% of the total sample provided counsel for professional advancement.

### *Structural Differences in Programs*

Table 2 notes the means and standard deviations for the professional orientation of centers according to three indices of program structure: size, legal structure, and type of service.

**TABLE 2**  
**Summary of Professional Orientation (Center)**  
**by Program Structure (N=85)**

<i>Structural Component</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Prof Orient</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
<i>Size</i>				
Small (20-59 students)	28	15.36		3.71
Medium (60-99 students)	28	14.30		3.12
Large (100-336 students)	29	14.14		2.54
<i>Legal Structure</i>				
Nonprofit	64	15.49		2.61
Nonprofit—public	21	15.47		2.83
Nonprofit—private	43	15.50		2.54
For-profit	21	11.60		2.82
<i>Program Type</i>				
Half day—one 4-5 hr session	16	15.93		2.84
Half day—two sessions	13	15.65		3.17
Full day	26	14.31		2.68
Full/half day combination	30	13.49		3.66
<i>All</i>	85	14.53		3.14

*Size.* Given the uniform agreement in the literature that increased center size increases the collective financial and human resources of the center, there was certainly sufficient basis to argue that increased size might have had a beneficial impact on a program's professional orienta-

tion. In the administration of early childhood centers where budgetary constraints often limit implementing professional growth opportunities for staff, it would seem reasonable that larger centers might have an advantage over smaller programs. At least for the programs included in this study, this was apparently not the case. Indeed, just the opposite pattern emerged. When programs were grouped into three equal categories by size, the smaller centers rated highest in professional orientation ( $M = 15.36, SD 3.71$ ) when compared to the large centers ( $M = 14.14, SD 2.54$ ) and the medium-sized centers ( $M = 14.30, SD 3.12$ ). These differences were not statistically significant, however ( $F(2,82) = 1.21$ ).

*Legal Structure.* It was disquieting to see the results of the data analysis with respect to differences in the professional orientation of programs based on legal structure. Early childhood educators have worked hard over the past decade to reduce the polarizing rhetoric between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors claiming that indicators of quality within each sector cover the spectrum of poor to excellent. This generalization may be true, but the results of the ANOVA show that there are strong statistically significant differences in the professional orientation of programs based on legal structure ( $F(1,83) = 33.81, p < .0001$ ).

Table 2 provides a breakdown of means by legal structure. It should be noted that since the mean differences within the nonprofit sector between private and public nonprofits was so small, these two subcategories were combined for the analysis of variance procedures. The mean professional orientation of the 64 nonprofit programs was 15.49 ( $SD 2.61$ ); the mean professional orientation of the 21 for-profit centers was 11.60 ( $SD 2.82$ ). The range of scores for the nonprofit centers on this subscale was 11 - 22 out of a possible 25. For the for-profit programs, the range was 7 - 20. It was interesting to note, however, that a 95% confidence interval of the distributions of the two means did not overlap.

Proprietary operators are often vocal in their insistence that by exercising efficient managerial skills, they can make their programs profitable without any reduction in the quality of care provided. Perhaps we need to look closer at how the for-profit sector interprets "efficient management." Many of the indicators of a center's professional orientation involve decisions that directly relate to fiscal priorities. Such activities as providing on-site staff development, reimbursing teachers for tuition for college courses, and equipping the center with a well-stocked professional library may be viewed as "nonessential" frills that cut into an already tight profit margin.

It should be emphasized, however, that many of the indicators of a strong professional orientation do not impact a program's budget. Even with limited resources, there are many creative ways that programs can support the professional growth of employees. What is essential, though,

is a commitment to professionalism that makes weaving these activities into the daily life of a program an uncompromised priority.

This study also found significant differences in the professional orientation and the commitment of workers that corresponded to the legal structure of their program (professional orientation,  $F(1,724) = 15.32, p < .0001$ ; commitment,  $F(1,736) = 5.11, p < .02$ ). Individuals working for nonprofit centers scored higher on each of these subscales (Professional orientation: nonprofit,  $M = 5.18$ ; for-profit,  $M = 4.09$ . Commitment: nonprofit,  $M = 6.96$ , for-profit,  $M = 6.58$ ). It is possible that a program's professional orientation serves as a kind of model for the individual's professional orientation by setting professional standards and expectations.

*Program Type.* The results of this study also indicate that there are significant differences in the professional orientation of programs that can be attributed to program type ( $F(1,83) = 7.87, p < .001$ ). Overall, half-day programs had a higher professional orientation than full-day programs. Here again, the subcategories within the two major program types were combined for the analysis of variance procedures. The mean professional orientation score for the 29 half-day programs was 15.81 ( $SD 2.87$ ); the mean professional orientation score for the 56 full-day programs was 13.87 ( $SD 3.09$ ). A closer look at the data warrants interpreting these differences with caution, however. Even though the difference between means was statistically significant, the means of the two distributions overlap somewhat and the actual difference between means was not quite two points.

Program type, as well, proved to have a strong effect on the professional orientation of individuals and their commitment to the center. In both areas, significant differences were noted between half-day and full-day programs (Professional orientation,  $F(1,724) = 5.25, p < .02$ ; commitment,  $F(1,735) = 9.08, p < .003$ ). Individuals working for half-day programs consistently scored higher on each scale (Professional orientation: half-day,  $M = 5.35$ ; full-day,  $M = 4.73$ . Commitment: half-day,  $M = 7.18$ ; full-day,  $M = 6.78$ ).

When we look at the results of this study with respect to program type, it is clear that professional orientation from an individual or organization perspective is closely related to time. The demands of working with children eight or more hours a day leaves precious little time or energy to focus on professional growth activities. Even coordinating schedules in full-day programs to allow for regular staff meetings is often problematic for directors. The Head Start model of one 4-5 hour session leaving time for planning, preparation, diagnostic evaluation, and parent conferences recognizes the professional role of the staff. Although costly, this model may serve as a useful prototype for improving the professional orientation of programs.

### Conclusion

This study has looked at professional orientation from two related perspectives—that of the individual worker and that of the early childhood center. This bifurcated construct has been convenient for methodological purposes, but may also prove useful in generating recommendations for practice.

From the perspective of the individual, for example, the results of the present study suggest that if early childhood educators are to move beyond the prevailing image of caretakers as unskilled workers, they must begin by making their actions consistent with their self-perceptions of professionalism. In other words, early childhood educators must earn the right to be called professional. An important step in that direction would be to codify standards for a career ladder that reflect different levels of knowledge, skills, and competence. And central to that framework should be expectations for a professional orientation for those who assume different roles in the early childhood organization.

From the center's perspective, the agenda for action is clear. When professionalism is promoted, teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and precise talk about teaching practice. They plan, design, research, prepare, and evaluate teaching materials together. But most important, they have built in organizational mechanisms that allow them to regularly reflect on their performance, evaluate feedback, and examine new and alternative practices.

Separating professional orientation conceptually may be convenient for methodological purposes and for generating programmatic recommendations, but it is important not to lose sight of the dynamic interactive nature of these person-environment variables. In practice, these two perspectives of professional orientation clearly intersect. The results of this study provide preliminary evidence that both the professional orientation of individuals and their level of commitment to their center are influenced by the degree of professionalism promoted in the work environment. Additional research is needed, however, to better understand this dynamic reciprocal relationship between worker and workplace and how program administrators can best promote a strong professional orientation from each perspective.

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