

THE CHILD CARE

a critical component

CENTER DIRECTOR

of program quality

by Paula Jorde Bloom

Directors, as “gatekeepers to quality,” play a critical role in the success of center-based programs, but state standards regulating qualifications do not reflect the importance of the position.

There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in assessing the dimensions of quality as they relate to early childhood environments for young children. Considerable progress has been made in defining specific criteria to evaluate quality indicators, and guidelines are now available on how to best articulate these criteria to the public.¹ The underlying assumption guiding this movement is that certain quality factors are linked to positive results in children.

Most of the research in this area, however, has focused on caregivers (teachers) and the role they play in facilitating children's development. Little systematic inquiry has been conducted on the role directors play (however indirect it may be) in influencing the contextual factors that support

or inhibit quality in early childhood programming. While there is uniform agreement among theorists about the importance of the director's role and the need for highly trained personnel to serve in this capacity, there is a surprising lack of agreement about what constitutes minimum qualifications and how individuals should be trained.

This article provides an overview of the critical role that directors play as the “gatekeeper to quality” of center-based programs. The multifaceted role of the director and the competencies

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needed for effective center administration are reviewed; state regulations governing minimum qualifications are summarized; and a profile of directors is presented. Finally, the link between qualifications and program quality is reviewed and the policy implications of increasing requisite qualifications are addressed.

Defining Administrative Competence

The director's role in the child care center is both central and complex. In a number of powerful ways the director influences the climate of a center both as a workplace for teaching staff and as an educational and nurturing environment for children. As budget analyst, building and grounds manager, staff supervisor, record keeper, receptionist, community liaison, public relations coordinator, curriculum developer, fundraiser, nurse, nutritionist, and child advocate, the director wears many hats and needs a repertoire of competencies to effectively carry out these diverse roles.

The competencies needed will vary with the ages and backgrounds of the children enrolled, the range of services provided, the philosophical orientation of the program, and the legal sponsorship of the center. The size of the program, as well, certainly affects the scope and complexity of the administrative role. Directors of small programs may have few administrative tasks and serve as classroom teachers for part of the day, whereas directors of large programs may have multiple sites, multiple funding sources, and a large diverse staff to coordinate. Thus, directing different types of programs requires varying levels of administrative sophistication.

One way to understand the range of competencies needed to administer a program is to look at the task performance areas that encompass the director's role.² These can be grouped into four broad categories.

Organizational Theory and Leadership. Directors need a sound understanding of organizational theory in order to assess program needs, articulate a clear vision for the center, implement goals, and evaluate program effectiveness. They also need a good understanding of the dynamics of group behavior and how different leader-



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ship styles are appropriate in different situations.

As personnel managers, they must have skill in recruiting, training, and supervising staff in order to maintain a congenial, productive work team. Directors must also manage information and be able to translate program goals into well-written policies and procedures. Additionally, they must be alert to changing demographics, social and economic trends, and developments in the field. Finally, directors must have knowledge of themselves as growing professionals, and understand how that professional identity translates into a code of ethical behavior and professional responsibility.

Child Development and Early Childhood Programming. In order to guide others in developing and implementing sound programs for young children, directors need a thorough understanding of developmental patterns in early childhood and their implications for individual and group care. They must be keen observers able to assess each child's needs and know how to assist staff in planning developmentally appropriate curricular experiences to meet those needs.

Directors also need a sound understanding of the principles of environmental psychology and how the

arrangement of space and materials can support optimal development. They need organizational skills to implement effective systems to maintain enrollment, attendance, and anecdotal data on children. And because they are ultimately accountable for the health and safety of the children in their care, they need a firm grounding in the principles of health, safety, and nutrition as these relate to different aspects of program implementation.

Fiscal and Legal Issues. Because directors must respond to the laws and requirements of different government regulatory agencies and funding sources, they should have a good working knowledge of federal, state, and local regulations governing center-based programs. As financial managers, they oversee the disbursement of funds and thus should know how to develop a budget, set tuition rates, prepare needed financial reports, and maintain appropriate insurance coverage. In addition, they need a good understanding of the principles of fundraising and grantsmanship in order to secure funding from a variety of private and public sources.

Board, Parent, and Community Relations. Because the director usually serves as liaison with the child care center's advisory board, owner, or sponsoring

agency, the ability to articulate a rationale for program practices is critical. Directors serve an important public relations role and thus must also be able to interpret child growth and development to parents and others in the community.

In order to effectively meet the needs of the parents of children enrolled in their program, a knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of family life, particularly families of different social and cultural backgrounds, is also essential. Finally, in marketing their program and serving as a resource to parents, directors must have a working knowledge of community services that can support their efforts. In this regard, it is important they have regular contacts with professional organizations, state and federal congressional representatives, community service organizations, consultants, public schools, advocacy groups, medical and mental health units, local colleges, and local news media.

State Regulations Governing Director Qualifications

State requirements for child care personnel are critical because they have a direct impact on the preparation of workers.³ Despite the accumulation of evidence in the research literature regarding the crucial impact of caregivers on children's development in their early years,⁴ personnel requirements are not regulated in the same manner as those for degreed professionals in elementary schools.

Currently there are no federal regulations governing the qualifications of child care directors. Standards for center directors are determined by state regulatory bodies. In most states, the regulation of child care personnel is tied to center licensing and falls under the auspices of the Department of Public Welfare or the state's equivalent of a Department of Child and Family Social Services. From state to state, however, regulations differ on almost every aspect of what is required. Indeed, the most striking characteristic about the requirements is their diversity. There is neither consistency nor a great deal of specificity in what constitutes minimum qualifications for directors.⁵



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Some states do not differentiate among personnel roles in child care settings and instead include directors under the broad category of "child care worker." Others may define a second level of teacher more highly qualified in child development than the rest of the teachers, but do not necessarily designate this person to fill the role of director. Those states that do designate separate requirements for directors often use quite different terminology to define the director's role. Some states require that centers with forty or more children hire a nonteaching director.

In most states the minimum age required for directors is eighteen or twenty one. Some states merely require that directors demonstrate proficiency in basic literacy skills. Others do not require directors to have any relevant qualifying education at all prior to employment. Several states require only a high school diploma as formal education. Over one-half of the states now require directors to be qualified in child development and more than a dozen require substantial course work.

Only a small number of states require directors to have course work in administration as well as child development. References to a supervised internship, common in most certification programs, are entirely absent in state standards for

child care directors. Texas, however, is in the process of establishing a credential for directors. Less than half the states require ongoing training for directors.

The issue of requisite qualifications is further complicated by the fact that a number of states have promulgated a separate set of standards for early childhood personnel working in preprimary programs under the auspices of the public schools.⁶ The requirements for personnel in these settings is typically tied to the state's teacher certification requirements. Across the board, qualifications under these standards are more stringent than those required for personnel working in programs licensed under the state's department of social services or equivalent regulatory agency.

In many instances, this situation has resulted in a fragmented system characterized by inequities.⁷ Many believe we are at risk of developing a two-tiered system of early childhood educators. Attracted by higher salaries, more attractive benefits, and better working conditions, the best and brightest early childhood educators are being lured into the public school system. The significant differences in salaries and the status accorded to those working for public schools exacerbates the problem of staff turnover and compromises

program quality in nonpublic pre-kindergarten programs.

A Profile of Child Care Center Directors

While little research has focused specifically on early childhood center directors, it is possible to piece together a profile of directors' background characteristics from several studies that have looked into different aspects of the child care profession.⁸ The average child care center director is female (88–94 percent), between thirty-six and forty-two years of age, and quite experienced. Directors have worked at their present positions an average of five years and in the field of early childhood education for ten years.

Salary data about directors tends to be unreliable because it is difficult to make comparisons across program types. Directors of for-profit programs, for example, often draw a minimal salary, choosing instead to reinvest would-be compensation back into their center. This deferred compensation in the way of increased capital investment is seldom reported on salary surveys. Other directors receive fringe benefits in lieu of salary (for example, free tuition for their own children, use of the school car, or tuition reimbursement for courses taken) which may be difficult to translate into actual dollar amounts.

Despite the complexity of gathering accurate salary data, what information has been collected does not provide a very glowing picture of the financial remuneration associated with the position. The National Child Care Staffing Study (NCCSS) found that directors with a baccalaureate degree averaged \$11.75 per hour—only three-quarters as much as comparably educated women and one-half as much as comparably educated men in the civilian labor force.⁹ The NCCSS also found that over the past decade, directors' salaries have not kept up with inflation.

Current Levels of Training. Approximately 70–75 percent of directors hold a baccalaureate degree and roughly a third of this group have gone on to earn a master's degree or doctorate.¹⁰ While there is little comparative empirical data, it does appear that the level of formal training has increased over the last ten years. Still, the level of education does not match that of elementary and secondary teachers, where

approximately 51 percent of the work force has an advanced degree.

Typically, child care directors are promoted to their positions from the ranks of teachers. In a survey of New York directors,¹¹ Norton and Abramowitz found that 78 percent of the directors in their sample had been head teachers or assistant directors before assuming full administrative responsibility for their centers. In a study assessing the education and training of 990 directors in Illinois,¹² it was found that only 14 percent had not been classroom teachers prior to assuming their administrative roles. Interest and experience appear to be the primary criteria for promotion, rather than formal training in program administration. Directors with concentrated course work in child care management are rare. Fifty-six percent of the child care administrators in the Norton and Abramowitz study indicated that they had no courses or workshops in early childhood administration. In the Illinois study, 38 percent of the directors reported they had not had a single course relating to the administration of educational programs. Of those who had specialized training in program administration, 47 percent reported that their course work was taken after they had assumed their role as director.

Most directors, it appears, have put together a patchwork system of course work, inservice professional development, and on-the-job training. Those administrators who have received administrative training at the college level have usually taken a single course at a community college that in one brief semester covers everything from staff management to bookkeeping. As a result, directors often express as the most troublesome problem areas of their job those aspects of program administration in which they have had little formal training (e.g., legal and fiscal issues, staff management, program evaluation).¹³

Directors' Professional Orientation and Commitment. Several studies confirm that directors as a group exhibit a strong commitment to the profession.¹⁴ Directors overwhelmingly perceive themselves as "professionals." In one study, 87 percent of directors surveyed perceived their work as a "career" as opposed to "a job."¹⁵ In another study, over 90 percent said they would choose a career in early childhood

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if they were to make a career choice again.¹⁶

Still, it is disappointing to note that directors as a group do not engage in many activities associated with a professional orientation. Over 40 percent of directors are not members of any professional organization, a third of them do not subscribe to any professional magazines or journals, and less than one-half had written a single advocacy letter during the previous year.¹⁷

Directors' Qualifications and Overall Program Quality: Is there a Link

Just how are director qualifications related to overall program quality? Compelling evidence is accumulating that suggests that directors are indeed the "gatekeepers to quality," setting the standards and expectations of others to follow. In a study conducted by Phillips, Scarr, and McCartney,¹⁸ it was found that the overall quality of the center was highly associated with director's experience. In a Pennsylvania study,¹⁹ Kontos and Fiene found that children in programs with more experienced directors did better on measures of language and sociability.

A recent study by Powell and Stremmel²⁰ supports the proposition that the director in his/her leadership role sets the standards and expectations for the staff to follow. Powell and Stremmel found that the program director has a strong impact on the variety and sources of information available to caregivers, particularly those with limited or no training in early childhood education. The results of their research provide support for a "trickle down" conception of information flow from director to worker.

In a study involving 103 directors of child care programs,²¹ the director's level of formal education was found to be the strongest predictor of program quality as measured by the Early Childhood Classroom Observation Scale. Specialized training in early childhood education and program administration also showed significant associations with overall program quality.

A more recent study²² assessed the effects of leadership training on directors' perceived and demonstrated level of competence. Both employee perceptions of the overall organizational climate and class-

room indicators of quality showed significant gains when directors had participated in a sixteen-month course of study in early childhood leadership and advocacy.

These studies confirm preliminary findings reported by Bredekamp regarding the characteristics of programs that have achieved center accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Bredekamp states, "We have observed that the most salient predictor of overall program quality is a director with a strong educational background in early childhood education/child development, and at least one degree (bachelor's or master's)."²³

Implications for Policy and Practice

The central issue in the debate regarding requisite qualifications focuses on the amount and content of formal training and experience that should be required before an individual assumes the role of center director, and how much inservice training should be required each year once the director is on the job. When compared to other human service professions, current requirements for child care directors are at best at a paraprofessional level. Moreover, standards are often vague and unevenly enforced. There is a growing consensus, however, that requisite qualifications for center directors should be strengthened. Such sentiments have come from professional associations promoting increased professionalism, experts in the field who see the programmatic effects of poor center leadership, and from directors themselves, who must cope daily with the demands of the job.

NAEYC recommends that center directors have a baccalaureate degree in early childhood education or child development and at least three years of full-time teaching experience with young children.²⁴ The competencies noted for the director highlight expertise in the supervision of adults and staff development. NAEYC's teacher education guidelines for colleges offering early childhood degrees also include standards addressing other administrative competencies such as program evaluation, community relations, and public policy.²⁵

In the criteria set forth for voluntary center accreditation,²⁶ NAEYC also recommends that the chief administrative officer

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of a center have training and/or experience in business administration. The chief administrative officer may or may not be the same person serving as early childhood specialist overseeing the educational program.

Leaders in the field, those individuals who have taken an active role in shaping social and public policy in early childhood education, are also becoming more vocal about the need to increase requisite qualifications for directors. In one study,²⁷ fully 87 percent of the national experts surveyed felt standards requiring only an Associate's degree and eighteen semester hours of course work in child development or early childhood education were too lenient. Most felt center directors should have specialized course work in program administration along with a degree in early childhood or child development and related teaching experience before assuming a directorship.

Many of these experts stated that the skill and knowledge of the director are the most important ingredients in creating and maintaining a quality program for children. They also felt that child care administrators require a specialized curriculum which emphasizes management and leadership skills within the context of their professional interest. Thus, the importance of on-going inservice training was stressed as an essential component of any standards promulgated to regulate director qualifications.

The rationale for increasing minimum standards is based in large part on what these experts perceive to be the increased complexity of the director's role and the potential risks to clients (children and parents) if responsibilities are not carried out in a highly professional manner. They cite, for example, the array of complex legal issues related to child abuse, infectious disease control, and insurance liability that did not confront directors just a decade ago.

Two areas surfaced as being most critical for specialized training: financial management and staff management. Several experts noted that assuring the financial stability of a program in an era of dwindling governmental resources means that the director needs a unique set of fiscal management skills that cannot come from experience alone.

Most frequently mentioned, however, was the changing nature of the director's job in recruiting and training staff. With more opportunities for women in other fields, the pool of qualified personnel is becoming increasingly competitive.

This, coupled with the low wages that most caregiver/teacher positions command, almost guarantees both higher numbers of untrained staff applying for positions and a continued high turnover rate among staff. Thus the director's skill in staff development is paramount to maintaining program continuity and assuring that quality care is provided. These skills can only be crafted through formal training and on-the-job experience.

In the past, states often equated a year of experience with a year of college. Research has shown, however, that education in early childhood or child development has a far stronger impact on teachers' behavior and on children's achievement than does years of experience.²⁸ Moreover, practical experiences may be valuable only when combined with a broad-based, formal educational program that serves as the necessary foundation for programmatic endeavors. Austin emphasizes that inservice training should never be viewed as the vehicle for achieving initial requisite competencies. He states, "Far from being helpful, it serves to maintain the child care worker in her lowly status by providing those in power with the useful argument that child care workers do not need to have degrees to be effective."²⁹

It also appears that child care experience is not a substitute for formal child-related training in creating a professional orientation to career development. Training and experience are not interchangeable. Powell and Stremmel have concluded from their research that college-level training, not work experience, is a better predictor of professionally-oriented career development patterns.³⁰ It appears that formal training within an accredited college program ties individuals into a traditional network of professional development. This link in itself may help improve the stature and professional image of workers.

There is little agreement among leaders in the field or directors about how pro-

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gram size should affect requisite qualifications. Many feel strongly that the principles of management needed to effectively direct a program are the same regardless of center size; it is only the scope of the job that needs to be done that varies. Others, however, believe that the higher level of managerial skills required to administer a large center necessitates more formal training. They state that organizing, planning, delegating, and supervising others becomes more important in a large center. So, too, are the consequences of poor leadership. Linking standards to program size may be one way to differentiate career ladder steps within the category of center director. Experience administering a small center (fewer than twenty-five children), for example, could serve as a training ground for administering a large center.

Obstacles to Change

If early childhood professional associations, leaders in the field, and a solid number of practitioners support increased qualifications for center directors, why hasn't there been more momentum in this direction? What are the obstacles to increasing present standards at the state level? And why hasn't the federal government taken a more aggressive role in establishing minimum and optimum criteria for staffing programs?

Most experts in the field agree there is inertia in these areas because of a number of economic and social considerations. First, the link between salaries and educational qualifications is clear. The short-term impact of raising qualifications for directors (or for teaching staff) would be to exacerbate an already untenable labor pool situation. Finding and retaining well-qualified staff at all levels is a serious problem for many programs. Simply put, highly trained individuals command higher salaries and have greater options, both in the field and outside early childhood education.

The economic consequences of raising standards in most other industries culminate in a higher-priced product, the cost of which is either absorbed by lowering company profits or is passed on to the consumer. The same rules do not apply to early childhood education. Parents (consumers) cannot shoulder increased program costs. In the for-profit sector, the

profit margin is already a lean one (if one exists at all) and center operators claim they cannot absorb the added costs that would be associated with higher salaries without sacrificing quality in other areas. Nonprofit programs that rely on state and federal subsidies have had to cope with shrinking government support in recent years. Unless a major shift in priorities occurs, these programs would also not be able to absorb the costs associated with increased standards.

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But economic factors are not the only obstacles to attracting and maintaining competent staff. Certainly there are many individuals who accept lower pay as a trade-off for rewarding, high-status positions. Most commentators on the status of the early childhood profession, however, agree that society's constant devaluing of the work related to young children contributes to the low status of workers and to their lower wages.³¹ These interlocking factors work against raising qualifications for any segment of the child care work force.

But as early childhood advocates argue, improving qualifications may be the best way of improving salaries and increasing professionalism in the field. Differentiated staffing models with salary scales that reflect different levels of training and work experience have helped to improve the status of workers in other occupations. There is some support in the research that this may be an effective strategy. It has been found that programs committed to better funding for teaching and administrative staff do not report as many problems in recruitment and retention.³²

To minimize the economic disequilibrium and labor shortages that would result from increasing requisite qualifications for directors, it is important that changes in state standards be accompanied by well-funded loan-forgiveness programs for students pursuing degrees, targeted scholarship money for low-income stu-

dents, and improved access to administrative training. These opportunities should be made available to current directors who wish to upgrade their knowledge and skills as well as to teachers who wish to pursue career advancement. In this area, there may be some help on the horizon. Recent passage of the Child Care and Development Block Grant and the Head Start Reauthorization Bill both include provisions for the allocation of funds for staff training and technical assistance.

If state guidelines are to become the standard-bearer of quality, policy makers must make a conceptual leap from initiating policies that merely protect children from harm, to those that advance children's developmental needs. With this in mind, current strategies based on punitive, mandatory regulations may not be the most effective approach to achieving this goal. An incentive model may better advance child welfare goals. Under such an approach, some state funds might be set aside for programs which meet a higher standard of staff qualifications, such as those recommended by the NAEYC.

In summary, increasing requisite director qualifications is a highly cost effective way for state licensing agencies to impact the quality of program services. In the long run, it may even have the ancillary effect of decreasing the need for regulations governing other aspects of the program. The evidence is clear—directors are a critical determinant in professionalizing child care programs. An investment in upgrading the leadership capabilities of those in charge will pay rich dividends. [E]

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