The Quality of Work Life in NAEYC Accredited and Nonaccredited Early Childhood Programs

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This study assessed differences in the work environments of NAEYC accredited and nonaccredited centers. The sample included 5,008 directors, teachers, and support staff who worked in 60 accredited and 320 nonaccredited child care centers in 33 states. Individuals completed the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey assessing their perceptions of different organizational practices. Data were aggregated using the center as the unit of analysis. The results revealed that there were notable differences between accredited and nonaccredited programs relating to the quality of work life for staff. In 10 dimensions of organizational climate, there were statistically significant differences between accredited and nonaccredited programs. The four dimensions which together accounted for the greatest variation in differences were innovativeness, goal consensus, opportunities for professional growth, and clarity. Statistically significant differences were also registered in staff’s level of job commitment, staff turnover, and teachers’ current and desired levels of decision-making influence.

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Since the publication of the National Day Care Study in the late 1970s (Ruopp, Travers, Glantz, & Coelen, 1979), the issues surrounding child care quality have become the central focus of study among early childhood researchers and developmental psychologists. The decade of the 1980s began with a very vague notion of what constitutes quality. By the end of the decade, we not only had specific accreditation criteria to evaluate the components of quality, we also had a solid research base to support the importance of high-quality programming.

The underlying assumption guiding the research agenda during this time was that certain quality factors were linked to positive outcomes for children. Studies confirmed that program quality affects children’s language and cognitive development as well as their social competence and social adjustment (Groehlman & Pence, 1987; Holloway & Reichhart-Erickson, 1988; McCartney, 1984; Phillips, McCartney, & Scarr, 1987). By the end of the 1980s, the message was clear: Good early childhood programs promote children’s development and learning; poor programs can place children at risk. The message was also clear that questions about quality need to be placed in a broader context that considers the interdependence of child care and family environments (Phillips, 1987).

The 1990s have seen a refinement in our understanding of the “quality” construct. Researchers have looked at the proximal and distal features of quality (Dunn, 1993), different methods for measuring quality (Scarr, Eisenberg, & Deater-Deckard, 1994), and the cost and economic impact of regulating quality programming (Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Team, 1995; Cukin, Morris, & Helburn, 1991).

A parallel line of research during this same period has looked at the characteristics of teachers and administrators in child care programs. Studies have examined issues relating to training and qualifications, job satisfaction and burnout, salaries and compensation, job turnover, and the importance of the adult work environment as it relates to quality programming (Arnett, 1989; Berk, 1985; Bloom & Sheerer, 1992; Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Team, 1995; Fleischer, 1985; Jorde-Bloom, 1988, 1989; Hildebrand & Seefeldt, 1986; Kontos & Stremmel, 1988; Russell, Clifford, & Warlick, 1990; Stremmel, 1991; Stremmel, Benson, & Powell, 1993; Phillips, Hovst, & Whitebook, 1989). This research has been premised on the belief that we cannot have quality outcomes for children without having a quality work life for the adults who care for children.

Even though the studies assessing the adult work environment in child care have used a variety of instruments to measure key variables such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover, and working conditions, there are some consistent patterns that have emerged from this strand of research. It appears that early childhood teachers derive their primary satisfactions from their daily interactions with children and to a lesser extent from parents and coworkers. Most teachers feel underpaid and undervalued by society, yet as a group they are committed to their jobs and to their centers. A surprisingly high percentage indicate if they could do it over again, they would enter the field of early childhood. Research regarding turnover and attrition have consistently found that child care ranks among the highest in turnover rates of all occupations. While the adequacy of wages
and benefits does surface as a strong predictor for intention to leave, the findings also suggest that wages alone do not function to predict job satisfaction, turnover, or the quality of care provided for children. The adequacy of a supportive work environment that includes supportive supervision and opportunities to be involved in decision making is also important.

In general, we can conclude from this line of research that teachers’ wages, their education and specialized training, and the adequacy of their working conditions are critical determinants of program quality. In the words of the National Child Care Staffing Study, “By failing to meet the needs of the adults who work in child care, we are threatening not only their well-being, but that of the children in their care” (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989, p. 3).

Organizational Climate as a Measure of Program Quality

Early childhood centers differ in subtle and abstract ways relating to the quality of work life for employees. This organizational climate has been described by some theorists as the perceived “quality” of an organization (Anderson, 1982; James & Jones, 1974; Tagiuri, 1978). Gilmer defines organizational climate as “those characteristics that distinguish the organization from other organizations and that influence the behavior of people in the organization” (1966, p. 57). It is influenced both by the structural components of an organization and the interactions between the individuals who work in the environment. Organizational climate is operationalized through a measure of the collective perceptions of all who work in a particular setting. These collective perceptions are essentially descriptive in nature. This is not to imply, however, that organizational climate is unidimensional. Many different organizational practices or variables contribute to the summary perception that people have of their work environment (Moos, 1979).

The rationale for measuring climate in organizations has traditionally been viewed through the lens of productivity. The argument goes that if one can accurately assess attitudes related to climate and can structure organizational changes to improve those attitudes, then increased productivity (e.g. greater profits in business and industry and better student outcomes in educational settings) will result. Indeed, there is considerable evidence to suggest that positive work attitudes are an accurate predictor of several school effectiveness indicators in elementary settings (Goodlad, 1983; Rosenholtz, 1989) and of child-oriented practices that are indicative of quality in early childhood settings (Berk, 1985; Ekholm & Hedin, 1987). But as Goodlad so forcefully argues, the antiquated factory model of productivity that seeks to establish a causal link between positive work attitudes and higher levels of productivity in the workplace is misguided and needs to be replaced. Practices should be humane in their own right.

While several instruments have been developed to assess organizational climate in business and industry and in elementary and secondary educational settings, until the mid-1980s, little attention was given to the situation-specific demands of early childhood work environments as they relate to center climate. The development of The Early Childhood Work Environment Survey in 1985 was based on the need for a standardized instrument that could describe and differentiate child care settings along several dimensions and could serve as a useful tool for early childhood practitioners wishing to monitor and improve
their work climate (Bloom, 1996). The ECWES measures the collective perceptions of employees regarding different organizational practices across ten dimensions. Table 1 provides a brief description of these dimensions.

Table 1.
The Ten Dimensions of Organizational Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collegiality</td>
<td>The extent to which staff are friendly, supportive, and trust one another. The peer cohesion and esprit de corps of the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Growth</td>
<td>The degree of emphasis placed on personal and professional growth. The extent to which opportunities are available to increase professional competence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Support</td>
<td>The degree of facilitative leadership that provides encouragement, support, and clear expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>The extent to which policies, procedures, and responsibilities are clearly defined and communicated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward System</td>
<td>The degree of fairness and equity in the distribution of pay, fringe benefits, and opportunities for advancement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>The degree of autonomy given to staff and the extent to which they are involved in making center-wide decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Consensus</td>
<td>The degree to which staff agree on the goals and objectives of the center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Orientation</td>
<td>The emphasis placed on good planning, efficiency, and getting the job done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Setting</td>
<td>The extent to which the spatial arrangement of the center helps or hinders staff in carrying out their responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovativeness</td>
<td>The extent to which the center adapts to change and encourages staff to find creative ways to solve problems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Program Quality and Accreditation Status

Although there has been little empirical research that addresses the question of whether accreditation results in better outcomes for children (Bredekamp, 1993), there is ample anecdotal evidence that the accreditation self-study process promotes positive changes in
programs and those changes have been linked to beneficial outcomes for both children and staff (Bundy, 1988; Carter, 1986; Herr, Johnson, & Zimmerman, 1993). In a study of 106 directors of accredited programs, Herr, Johnson, and Zimmerman note that the component areas of evaluation, curriculum, and administration were reported as having improved the most as a result of the self-study process. In the evaluation component, the self-study process forces programs to examine assessment practices at multiple levels and for multiple constituencies. In the curriculum component, directors report that they make improvements in classroom organization, planning, and cultural activities for children. In the administrative area, directors indicate that improvements occur through the development of written goals, policies, and handbooks. They also mention improved communication between administration and staff as a result of their participation in the self-study process.

There is an accumulating body of research that suggests that accredited centers are distinctively different from nonaccredited centers (Bredekamp, 1993). When data from a U. S. General Accounting Office study of 208 accredited centers (Powell, Eisenberg, Moy, & Vogel, 1994) is compared to other national samples (Willer, Hoffert, Kisker, Divine-Hawkins, Fairquhar, & Glantz, 1991; Whitebook et al., 1989), it appears that accredited programs not only pay their teachers more, but they also provide a more comprehensive benefits package. An analysis of 14 centers in the original sample of the National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitebook et al., 1989) and of an additional 11 accredited centers in the four-year follow-up study (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 1993) found that accredited centers had better trained staff, paid higher wages, had lower staff turnover, and provided more developmentally appropriate activities and higher quality caregiving for children than did nonaccredited centers.

Organizational Climate and Accreditation Status

A study of 103 centers in Illinois (Jorde-Bloom, 1989) revealed a significant relationship between the quality of a program (as measured by accreditation criteria) and the program's overall organizational climate. The staff at high-quality programs held more positive perceptions about their work environment. Higher-quality programs also had lower turnover rates. The Illinois study used only a global measure of organizational climate, however, and it did not include a direct separate analysis of programs by accreditation status. Pope and Stremmel (1992) conducted a study of 27 centers that examined differences in ten dimensions of organizational climate between accredited and nonaccredited programs. They found that the two NAEYC-accredited programs in their sample rated significantly higher in the dimensions of decision making, goal consensus, physical setting, and clarity than did those that were not accredited.

The present study was designed to provide additional data regarding differences in the work environments of accredited and nonaccredited centers. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: 1) Are there significant differences between workers' perceptions of organizational climate in accredited and nonaccredited centers? And if so, what pattern of organizational practices best predicts these differences? 2) Are differences in accredited status reflected in workers' level of organizational commitment and staff turnover? 3) Do workers in accredited and nonaccredited programs report different levels of current and desired decision-making influence?
Method

Sample

The sample for this study included 5,008 directors, teachers, and support staff who worked in 380 child care centers in 33 states. These centers were selected from programs that had completed The Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES) during the past six years and had received a Work Environment Profile from the Early Childhood Professional Development Project of National-Louis University. Only programs providing center-based care and having a minimum of five staff were included in the sample. Furthermore, only employees who worked more than 10 hours per week were included in the data analysis.

Table 2 provides background information on the centers including a distribution by program type (part-day vs. full-day), legal auspices (nonprofit vs. for-profit), sponsorship (directors indicated one of eight categories that best described their programs), and NAEYC accreditation status. This table also provides information on three indices of center size: total student enrollment; total number of administrative, teaching, and support staff; and total number of teaching staff.

Approximately one-half of the directors/administrators of the programs in the sample volunteered their center’s participation; the other half were centers from multi-site agencies, with the governing board or agency administrator making the decision on participation. While the sample reflects the full spectrum of quality in the field, the average quality of these programs is probably slightly higher than that of the entire field. Directors who volunteer their program’s participation are usually those who are interested in improving program practices and have taken the initiative to request a Work Environment Profile as one step in the center-improvement process. There are many child care programs represented in the lower ranges of the quality spectrum that do not have the center leadership to initiate that process. These programs are not adequately represented in this sample.

Measures and Procedures

The Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (Bloom, 1996) was used to assess workers’ perceptions of 10 dimensions of organizational climate. The ECWES consists of 100 items that measure these 10 dimensions. The possible range of scores for each climate subscale is 0-10. A low score on any subscale represents unfavorable perceptions; a high score represents favorable perceptions. The instructions to the climate subscales ask respondents to check all items that describe their work environment “most of the time.” Thus, each of the items registers the degree of agreement with a specific statement. To control for response set, many of the items are worded negatively. For unfavorable statements, the scoring is reversed. Internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) for the ECWES is .95 for the entire scale, with individual subscale coefficients ranging from .69 (professional growth) to .83 (supervisor support). Additional information regarding the reliability and validity of the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey can be found elsewhere (Bloom, 1996; Pope & Stremmel, 1992).

The ECWES also includes several other scales. Data from three of these scales were included in this study: workers’ level of commitment to the center, the degree of congruence
between workers' perceptions of current work environment and their ideal work environment, and the degree of teachers' current and desired decision-making influence. The scores on each of these three scales range from 0 to 10.

Since organizational climate is conceptualized as a center variable, the unit of analysis is the center. Thus the center score for each of the climate subscales and the other scales on the ECWES is derived from generating a mean across staff within each center.

Data regarding background characteristics of the centers (program type, ages served, hours, legal auspices, enrollment, staff composition, staff turnover, and accreditation status) were elicited from directors of the centers via a separate questionnaire accompanying
the staff surveys. The directions in the cover survey recommended that the director assign a staff member to oversee the distribution and collection of surveys. Staff were given blank envelopes in which to return their surveys so that confidentiality could be preserved.

Results

Characteristics of Accredited Centers

The 60 accredited centers in this sample represented 784 directors, teachers, and support staff. The sample was predominately female (96%). Fifty-two (87%) of the accredited centers offered full-time care. All of the programs served preschool-age children; many also served infants and toddlers or provided before and after-school care for school-aged children. Eighty percent of the centers were nonprofit. The two most frequently cited categories in terms of sponsorship were private, independent nonprofit (28%) and Head Start (28%). The average enrollment was 97 children; the average total staff was 17.

A preliminary analysis of the data was conducted to ascertain if the two groups (accredited and nonaccredited) were evenly matched with respect to their centers’ background characteristics. No significant differences surfaced for program type, legal auspices, sponsorship, or size, using all three indices (total enrollment, total staff, and total teaching staff).

Differences in Organizational Climate in Accredited and Nonaccredited Centers

A series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedures were conducted to discern if there were statistically significant differences in the 10 dimensions of organizational climate and global overall climate that might be attributed to accreditation status (accredited \( n = 60 \); nonaccredited \( n = 320 \)). As Table 3 summarizes, there were statistically significant differences between the two groups in all 10 dimensions of organizational climate as well as overall climate. In nine of the climate dimensions, the level of statistical significance exceeded the \( p < .001 \) level. Directors, teachers, and support staff in accredited programs had more favorable attitudes about the organizational climate of their centers.

In addition to the questions pertaining to each of the dimensions of organizational climate, respondents were also asked to rate on a Likert-type scale how their current work environment resembled their ideal work environment. The resulting Congruence with Ideal score reflects the average rating on this scale. The results of the data analysis showed that there were statistically significant differences \( (p < .01) \) between accredited and nonaccredited programs (see Table 3), indicating that the work environment for early childhood educators in accredited programs more nearly approached their ideal than did the environment for those in nonaccredited programs.

Because there is some colinearity between the different dimensions of organizational climate (Bloom, 1996; Pope & Stremmel, 1992), a discriminant analysis was conducted on the 10 climate subscales across the two program groups. Discriminant analysis determines which climate subscales, taken together as a set best differentiate accredited and nonaccredited centers. Results of the analysis yielded one factor that discriminated significantly between the two groups. Table 4 reports the standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients. This function accounted for 75% of the cases being classified
correctly. Positive coefficients increase the discriminant function value and tend to be associated with accredited programs. Taken together, four areas (innovativeness, goal consensus, opportunities for professional growth, and clarity) best differentiated the two types of programs.

Table 3.
Means and F-Scores for Centers by NAEYC Accreditation Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCALES</th>
<th>NON-ACCREDITED (N=320)</th>
<th>ACCREDITED (N=60)</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Climate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegiality</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>10.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Growth</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>41.86***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Support</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>14.21***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>7.31</td>
<td>33.89***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward System</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>6.99</td>
<td>21.34***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>6.87</td>
<td>7.63</td>
<td>16.34***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Consensus</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>7.74</td>
<td>35.42***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Orientation</td>
<td>7.04</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>12.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Setting</td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td>7.43</td>
<td>7.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovativeness</td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>45.49***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total overall Climate</td>
<td>65.80</td>
<td>74.09</td>
<td>38.67***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruence with Ideal</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>7.44</td>
<td>7.58**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>7.37</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>9.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-Making Influence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>15.42***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired</td>
<td>7.92</td>
<td>8.38</td>
<td>11.98***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Turnover</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>3.86*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001
Table 4.
Discriminant Analysis Subscale Loadings for Organizational Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Innovativeness</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Consensus</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Growth</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Orientation</td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Support</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegiality</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making Structure</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Setting</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward System</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences in Commitment and Turnover in Accredited and Nonaccredited Centers

As expected, the results of the data analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant correlation between job commitment and overall organizational climate ($r = .66, p < .001$) for the entire sample. Those centers with a better quality of work life had staff who expressed greater pride in their centers, felt more committed to their programs, and put a lot of extra effort into their work. It appears that accreditation status may be a strong predictor of higher levels of job commitment. The results of the data analysis revealed statistically significant differences in the level of job commitment between early childhood workers at accredited and nonaccredited programs ($F [1,378] = 9.29, p < .01$). Directors, teachers, and support staff at nonaccredited programs indicated more frequently that they felt trapped in their jobs, were just “putting in time,” or often thought of quitting.

Although not nearly as strong, the results of the data analysis also revealed statistically significant differences in turnover between the two types of programs ($F [1,378] = 3.86, p < .05$) (Turnover in this study included administrative, teaching, and support staff; not just teachers.) The mean percentage turnover rate at accredited programs was 17% compared to 24% at nonaccredited programs. Of the accredited programs, 22% indicated they had no staff turnover during the preceding 12 months. This compared with 14% of the nonaccredited programs.
For the entire sample, there was a low but statistically significant negative correlation between turnover and commitment ($r = -.25, p < .001$) and between turnover and overall organizational climate ($r = -.16, p < .01$).

**Differences in Decision-Making Influence in Accredited and Nonaccredited Centers**

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree of current and desired decision-making influence teachers had in five areas: ordering materials and supplies, interviewing and hiring new staff, determining program objectives, training new aides and teachers, and planning the daily schedule of activities. As Table 3 indicates, respondents at accredited centers rated teachers' current level of decision-making influence higher than did teachers at nonaccredited centers ($M = 5.91$ vs. $M = 6.64, p < .001$) Differences in reported levels of desired decision-making influence were also statistically significant ($M = 7.92$ vs. $8.38, p < .001$). In 371 of all centers (98%), staff indicated that teachers wanted more decision-making influence than they currently had. By contrast, in nine of the nonaccredited centers, staff indicated that they actually had more decision-making influence than they wanted. There was not a single case in the accredited centers in which there was a reverse discrepancy.

**Discussion**

**Organizational Climate**

The results of this study can be interpreted in a couple of ways; that the accredited programs included in this sample were higher quality prior to seeking accreditation or the self-study process of accreditation had a positive impact on workers' attitudes about their programs. Although a causal-comparative study of this nature cannot determine a definitive causal relationship between variables, if one looks closely at the four dimensions of organizational climate (innovativeness, goal consensus, opportunities for professional growth, and clarity) that together best differentiated accredited and nonaccredited programs, some insights may be gleaned as to why the accreditation process might impact workers' perceptions in positive ways.

**Innovativeness.** The directors, teachers, and support staff of the accredited centers in this study more frequently stated that their programs emphasized creativity, encouraged diverse opinions, and looked at new educational approaches than did the staff of nonaccredited centers. Because innovativeness implies change and a willingness to take risks, it is possible that the staff of the accredited centers perceived their programs to be more innovative. The anecdotal evidence from directors seeking accreditation highlights the change aspects of the accreditation process (Bundy, 1988; Carter, 1986; Herr, Johnson, & Zimmerman, 1993). Indeed, the goal of accreditation is to "provide an opportunity for the entire staff and the parents they serve to examine the program's operations and identify strengths and weaknesses" (NAEYC, 1991, p. 6). Accreditation provides a framework for the change process — an opportunity to establish the norms of continuous improvement that characterize high-quality early childhood programs.

The degree of innovativeness of a school is linked to quality outcomes in other educational settings (Fullan, 1991). In examining differences in effective and less-effective high schools, for example, Lightfoot (1983) found that what distinguished exemplary schools
was their "consciousness of imperfection" — their willingness to look at their imperfections and create a climate of continual improvement. Little (1982) also discusses the workplace conditions that foster school success. She states that when quality is viewed as a process, not an end product, teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and precise talk about teaching practices. They plan, design, research, prepare, and evaluate teacher materials together. But most important, they have built in mechanisms that allow them to regularly reflect on their performance, evaluate feedback, and examine new and alternative practices.

The results of this study confirm that staff who work in accredited programs see change not as something to be avoided but rather as a vital and necessary ingredient of a high-quality early childhood program. For some of these programs, it is possible that the mechanisms for center evaluation and improvement were already in place before they initiated the accreditation process; for others, the self-study format may have provided the framework for change and center improvement.

**Goal consensus.** Goal consensus measures the degree to which staff agree on the goals and educational objectives of the center. Simply put, it measures the extent to which there is a common vision for the program. Goal consensus is crucial because it directly affects the organization's ability to carry out its mission (Rosenholtz, 1989). Educational goals establish priorities — what we want children to do, to be, or to have as a result of their early childhood experience. Differences in socioeconomic status, cultural traditions, education, and experience among staff provide richness and diversity to programs, but they also contribute to differences in value orientations. Goal consensus thus also reflects the ability of staff to compromise and work out differences so that they can achieve a common vision.

The results of this study indicate that early childhood educators working in accredited centers believe their programs have well-defined and agreed-upon educational goals and objectives and that their colleagues share a common vision of what their center should be like. Staff at nonaccredited programs, on the other hand, more frequently report that goals are left vague and people disagree on what should be taught to children. It is possible that the self-study process provides the impetus for goal consensus by encouraging staff to examine program philosophy and educational objectives to ensure consistency between what the center says it does in its written documents and what it actually does in practice.

Previous research provides some clues as to how goal consensus may influence the quality of teaching practices and overall program effectiveness. In the elementary setting, Rosenholtz (1989) found that ambiguous goals and a lack of unifying purpose lead to greater instructional uncertainty. In settings with these characteristics, Rosenholtz says that teachers tend to define and independently pursue their own goals. This reinforces norms of self-reliance rather than norms of collaboration. The result, Rosenholtz believes is reduced professional interaction and substantive dialogue by teachers about their work. Teachers in these settings often feel isolated and are reluctant to admit when they need help. Because goal-setting activities often accentuate those instructional objectives toward which teachers should aim their improvement efforts, they compel teachers to request and offer advice and assistance in helping their colleagues improve.
Opportunities for professional growth. Because research has demonstrated a strong link between the professional qualifications of staff and positive outcomes in children (Arnett, 1989; Berk, 1985; Whitebook et al., 1989; Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Team, 1995), the accreditation criteria include a separate component for staff qualifications and development. The results of this study show that accredited centers tend to place a higher priority on the professional development of teachers than do nonaccredited centers. They structure more opportunities for teachers to expand their knowledge base and widen their repertoire of new skills and competencies. Teachers at accredited centers receive more release time to attend professional conferences and visit other schools. Teachers are reimbursed more often for taking college courses. More accredited than nonaccredited programs have implemented a career ladder for professional advancement.

It is not difficult to see why the self-study process of accreditation might have a strong impact on this dimension of organizational climate. While many centers provide opportunities for the professional development of staff, those opportunities are often haphazard. Teachers are frequently unaware of what others are doing, and little encouragement is given for sharing ideas and resources. The self-study process of accreditation often forces programs to formalize their staff development plan and document how training is geared to meet the individual needs of teachers.

In addition, a certain “consciousness about practice” seems to occur when teachers go through the self-study process. Bundy’s account of her center’s journey through the accreditation experience captures this kind of professional self-reflection. She states,

I’m doing more careful written plans. I listen to myself as I talk to the children. I’m trying to ask more open-ended questions. I’m surprised at how often I ask yes-or-no questions that can be answered with one word, and I’m trying to change that. (1988, p. 28)

Clarity. The anecdotal data gathered regarding the benefits of accreditation (Bundy, 1988; Carter, 1986; Herr, Johnson, & Zimmerman, 1993) illuminate the many ways the self-study process encourages programs to clarify policies and procedures and to improve communication. It is not surprising, then, that the respondents from accredited centers reported more favorable attitudes in this dimension of organizational climate than did those who worked in nonaccredited centers. More accredited centers than nonaccredited centers distributed a parents’ handbook, developed a staff manual outlining personnel policies, prepared written job descriptions and contracts for employees, and distributed a center newsletter to parents. Moreover, the staff of accredited centers more frequently indicated that the policies and procedures at their centers were well defined, staff were well informed, written communication was clear, and conflicting demands were seldom made on staff. The findings of this study support previous research by Stremmel, Benson, and Powell (1993), which found that the frequency of communication at a center (e.g., the number of staff meetings it had) contributed to positive work attitudes.

Commitment and Turnover

The results of this study reveal that accreditation status may be a strong predictor of higher levels of job commitment. The staff at accredited programs expressed greater pride in their centers, felt more committed to their programs, and indicated that they put extra
effort into their work. While the link between commitment and accreditation status seems apparent, the impact of working conditions on a center’s staff turnover rate is a bit more complex. Turnover while reflective of the overall quality of work life, is also influenced by other factors such as a worker’s actual rate of compensation in terms of pay and benefits, the prevailing wage in the community, and the availability of alternative employment (Robinson, 1979; Russell, Clifford, & Warlick, 1990; Stremmel, 1991; Whitebook et al., 1989). Quality of work life though important, is only one factor having impact on a child care worker’s decisions to leave a center for another job in early childhood education or a different field altogether.

Decision-making Influence

There may be something in the self-study process of accreditation that increases teachers’ expectations for involvement in different types of center decisions. The staff of accredited centers report that teachers not only have more decision-making influence but also want more influence.

Previous research in the area of shared decision making provides some insights into why this might be the case. Rosenholtz stresses that norms of shared decision making “do not spring spontaneously out of teachers’ mutual respect and concern for each other” (1989, p. 44). Rather, those in charge (e.g., directors in child care centers) must structure the workplace conditions to foster genuine and sustained involvement in school-wide decisions. When such norms are established, it is possible that teachers’ own sense of self-efficacy is enhanced. Empowerment breeds willingness to take risks to increase one’s level of involvement. It is possible that the framework provided by the self-study process of accreditation does just that. Because accreditation is a center-wide endeavor, it’s success depends on the involvement of the entire staff. Involvement in the center’s self-study phase of accreditation may provide the vehicle for genuine input by staff that reinforces the importance of involvement and the staff’s unique competence in solving the problems they have identified. This process may be the driving force for creating stronger expectations for sustained involvement.

Conclusion

Even with the limitation that the average quality of the programs in this sample probably represent a slightly higher quality level than that of the total market for early childhood programs, the results still reveal that there were notable differences between accredited and nonaccredited programs relative to the quality of work life for staff. In all 10 dimensions of organizational climate, there were statistically significant differences between accredited and nonaccredited programs. The four dimensions that together account for the greatest variation in differences were innovativeness, goal consensus, opportunities for professional growth, and clarity. Statistically significant differences were also registered in staff’s level of job commitment, staff turnover, and teachers’ current and desired levels of decision-making influence.

While the results of this study allow one to confidently conclude that the quality of work life in accredited and nonaccredited centers does differ significantly, it does not provide incontrovertible evidence that it is the accreditation process itself that actually
causes staff's perceptions of their center's climate to be more positive. Additional research is needed to further clarify the cause and effect relationship of these variables. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that the accreditation process transforms programs from the inside out, making staff active partners in program improvement activities. Future research needs to examine just how the self-study framework supports directors in their efforts to empower staff and increase their commitment to the center.

References


