

# Research Notes

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## **The Dynamic Relationship between Child Care Work Environments and Learning Environments**

The child care industry has long struggled with poor working conditions, low wages, a lack of benefits, and low status, all contributing to an unstable and undereducated workforce. Research has shown that the ability to recruit and retain qualified teachers is impacted not only by wages and benefits, but the quality of the work environment.<sup>1</sup> There has been little empirical research, however, on the relationship between the child care work environment and classroom global quality. What is the relationship between program administration and global quality? What is the relationship between organizational climate and global quality? What is the relationship between a program's administrative practices and staffs' perceptions of organizational climate? These questions were the focus of a recently published study, *Child Care Work Environments: The Relationship with Learning Environments*, by researchers Lower and Cassidy.<sup>2</sup>

### **Methodology**

Data were collected in 2005 in cooperation with the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project (NCRLAP). Participants included child care directors and teachers at 30 centers recruited from throughout the state, including rural, suburban, and urban areas. Organizational climate was measured using the *Early Childhood Work Environment Survey* (ECWES); leadership and management practices were measured using the *Program Administration Scale* (PAS); and classroom global quality was measured using the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised* (ECERS-R).<sup>3</sup> Each center participating in the PAS assessment also participated in at least two Environment Rating Scale assessments. Among the 30 participating centers, 245 teacher surveys (ECWES) were returned, resulting in a 43% response rate.

### **Findings**

This study found a dynamic relationship among program leadership and management practices, teachers' perceptions of their work environment reflected in its organizational climate, and how that those variables relate to the classroom practices experienced by children.

- A significant positive correlation existed between organizational climate and classroom global quality,  $r(44) = .30, p = .05$ .
- Program administration, as measured by the PAS, was significantly related to classroom global quality. A Pearson  $r$  correlation revealed a statistically significant moderate correlation between PAS scores and ECERS-R classroom scores,  $r(54) = .29, p = .03$ .
- There was a statistical trend between the program administration score, as measured by the PAS, and the organizational climate. (It is important to note that the sample size was small; the finding might be statistically significant with a larger sample size and greater power).

Additional analyses were conducted to see if the director's level of experience or education were related to the PAS scores.

- Directors with at least some college courses or a 2-year college degree scored significantly lower ( $M = 2.49$ ) on the PAS than did directors with at least a 4-year degree ( $M = 3.24$ ).
- Directors with the North Carolina Administration III Credential scored significantly better ( $M = 3.50$ ) compared to directors with no or a lower level Administration Credential ( $M = 2.48$ ).
- Years of child care administration experience were not correlated with PAS scores,  $r(23) = .10, p = .66$ .

*"Focusing on the development of enhanced qualifications for directors seems equally important as developing qualifications for teachers."*

Lower and Cassidy

This study suggests that program administration practices and organizational climate are critical variables related to quality early care and education. The leadership and management practices of a program should be considered as an important variable when attempting to enhance program quality. This study also suggests that the director, responsible for determining the organizational climate, is an important key to classroom quality. Directors provide the support system that teachers need to create quality educational settings for the children in their classrooms.

## Policy Implications

This study found statistically significant relationships between the child care work environment, both program administration and organizational climate, and the global classroom quality. These findings have important policy implications.

- Including leadership and management practices in comprehensive evaluations of program quality such as Quality Rating Systems is necessary to achieve an accurate picture of the environment in which both children and adults develop.
- Using the *Program Administration Scale* (PAS) as an additional measure of quality in comprehensive evaluations such as Quality Rating Systems allows for a more comprehensive understanding of quality child care. The PAS measures director leadership and management by incorporating both transactional and transformational qualities of effective administrative practices.
- There is a need to focus quality enhancement initiatives on director preparation. The results of this study support directors attaining at least a 4-year degree and receiving specialized training in leadership and management in order to improve program quality. This study also suggests the need for further research into the benefit of attaining an Administrator Credential over and above the attainment of a degree and specialized training in leadership and management.
- It may be premature to eliminate the Parents and Staff subscale of the Environment Rating Scales in quality enhancement initiatives and applied research. The program administrative indicators of the ECERS have sometimes been omitted from research studies. Often, the rationale is that the interview method used to rate the administrative indicators is less objective than the observation method used to rate the other indicators. Omitting these indicators of quality, however, conveys the message that the work environments of early childhood teachers does not matter.

*“The development of the PAS provides the field with a reliable and comprehensive definition of excellence for leadership and management in early childhood settings.”*

Lower and Cassidy

In conclusion, leadership and management practices and organizational climate should be considered by policymakers in their efforts to build a stable teaching workforce and to improve child care quality. Understanding the dynamic relationship that exists between the center-level work environment and the classroom-level learning environment provides a basis for enhancing global quality by focusing on the needs of teachers and the organizational practices that support effective teaching.

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