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Research Notes

The Relationship between Administrator Qualifications and Family Engagement

As researchers and policymakers learn more about the factors that influence teaching and learning in early childhood settings, the importance of family engagement is emerging as an essential element. National, state, and local family involvement projects are engaging thousands of practitioners, parents, and leaders in family involvement networks, professional development initiatives, training and technical assistance systems, and workgroups to devote more resources toward family engagement.¹

There is evidence that director qualifications are related to instructional leadership practices and learning environments in early childhood programs,² but an understanding about the influence of program administrators on practices to garner family engagement is limited. In a meta-analysis of studies, Mendoza and her colleagues found that program-parent relationships were strengthened through improving relational trust, social respect, personal regard, and reciprocally valued perceptions of one another's competence and integrity.³ Encouraging staff to deepen and change their perspective about family-centered practices can lead to subtle shifts in staff-family connections.⁴

The purpose of the current study was to explore how directors' qualifications are related to factors that contribute to family engagement practices in early childhood programs.

METHODS

Director qualifications were assessed using Item 22 (Administrator) from the *Program Administration Scale* (PAS).⁵ This item measures multiple factors contributing to professional qualifications including level of formal education, specialized coursework in ECE, specialized management coursework, administrative experience, and professional contributions.

To assess the quality of family engagement practices, PAS Item 14—Program Evaluation, Item 16—Family Communications, and Item 17—Family Support and Engagement were used. Each PAS item is rated on a 7-point scale of quality practices with 1 representing *inadequate*, 3 *minimal*, 5 *good*, and 7 *excellent*. In the PAS, the term *parent* includes parents and guardians. The PAS was administered by certified PAS assessors between December 2009 and May 2014.

- *Program Evaluation* addresses the degree to which staff and families are involved in evaluating the program and how center-wide decisions are influenced by these evaluations. For this item, the first indicator strand relating to staff involvement in program evaluation was removed and the item score was

re-calculated to focus only on parent involvement in program evaluation practices.

- *Family Communications* assesses how families are oriented to the center, the variety of methods used to communicate with families, how the center implements procedures to achieve consistency between home and center practices, and the frequency of formal conferences.
- *Family Support and Involvement* looks at the variety of ways that staff support enrolled families and involve them in the life of the center.

SAMPLE

The sample comprised 470 center directors in 28 states. Seventeen percent of the directors worked in centers accredited by NAEYC.

Frequency distributions were generated to determine the percentage of directors whose qualifications met each of the multiple factors and at each of the five levels from Item 22 of the PAS. The following characteristics describe the qualifications of the directors in the sample:

- *Formal Education.* Overall, 61% of directors held a bachelor's degree or higher.
- *Specialized College Coursework in ECE.* Fifty-five percent of directors had completed at least 24 semester hours of college credit in specialized training in early childhood or child development.
- *Specialized College Coursework in Administration.* Overall, 40% of directors had not completed any college coursework in administration; 41% had completed at least 9 semester hours; and 15% had completed 21 or more semester hours of college credit in program administration.
- *Management Experience.* Three-quarters of directors had at least five years of management experience.
- *Professional Contributions.* Across all programs, only 6% of directors demonstrated commitment to the field by making at least six professional contributions within the past three years (e.g., engaging in advocacy, presenting at a conference, mentoring an individual from another program).

FINDINGS

To assess how directors' qualifications relate to family engagement practices, bivariate correlations were calculated between the overall director qualifications PAS item score and each of the items measuring family engagement practices. Moderate correlations were found and all of the relationships were statistically significant.

TABLE 1. CORRELATIONS—DIRECTORS' QUALIFICATIONS AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES (N = 470)

	<i>r</i>
Program Evaluation (Item 14—Strands 2 & 3)	.29*
Family Communications (Item 16)	.31*
Family Support and Involvement (Item 17)	.33*

**p* < .001

A further analysis was conducted to examine differences between programs that scored low (1 or 2), medium (3 or 4), or high (5, 6 or 7) in administrator qualifications. The results of the data analysis showed that mean scores for each of the measures of family engagement increased with the level of director qualifications.

TABLE 2. AVERAGE SCORES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR DIRECTORS WITH LOW, MEDIUM, AND HIGH QUALIFICATIONS

	Low	Medium	High
Program Evaluation (Item 14—Strands 2 & 3)	2.92	3.83	5.15
Family Communications (Item 16)	2.82	4.00	4.76
Family Support and Involvement (Item 17)	4.44	5.36	6.09

(Low: *n* = 329; Medium: *n* = 118; High: *n* = 34)

Significant correlations were found between directors' level of formal education and five factors related to the PAS measures of family engagement:

- **Communication about the children's learning and development** through the use of parent-teacher conferences and daily communication between teachers and families (*r* = .32; *p* < .001).
- The number of **family supports** provided by the program such as a resource library, home visits, and family support groups (*r* = .29; *p* < .001).
- **Involvement** of parents and guardians in center events, classroom activities, and program governance (*r* = .25; *p* < .001).
- Parents' involvement in **evaluating program practices** (*r* = .24; *p* < .001).
- **Feedback** from parents and guardians to inform decision making and program improvement (*r* = .23; *p* < .001).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that there is a relationship between family engagement practices and the qualifications of early childhood program directors. Certainly, there are many factors that contribute to families' involvement in their children's learning and participation with classrooms and schools. The moderate associations found in this study indicate that the education; specialized knowledge and skills; and experience of center directors may influence their ability to lead programs that actively engage families in the life of the center, value parents' feedback for program improvement, and embed systems for effective two-way communication.

Differences in family support and involvement, family communications, and program evaluation across groups of programs at varying levels of director qualifications highlight the positive association of education, specialized knowledge and skills, as well as experience. While these analyses are not predictive, the factors of family engagement that are positively related to the directors' level of formal education may suggest that general education over specialized knowledge and skills is essential to the leadership skills related to family engagement.

A majority of program administrators in this study held a bachelor's degree or higher and had specialized education in early childhood education. However, of concern is the substantial percentage of programs that are managed by individuals that have no specialized education in program administration. The absence of directors' contributing to the professionalization of the field indicates that barriers may exist to their collegial participation beyond their own programs. Further research is needed to better understand these deficiencies in the early childhood administrative workforce.

Administrative competence must be considered as policymakers and other systems developers focus on family engagement in early childhood education. It is encouraging that 23 states include the director's formal education as a criterion for their QRIS. The PAS items utilized in this research that correlate with family engagement practices are closely aligned with the NAEYC accreditation standards of knowing and understanding the program's families, sharing information between staff and families, program evaluation, accountability, and continuous quality improvement. This kind of alignment is essential for unifying the profession to provide guidance about what directors should know and be able to do regarding family engagement practices.

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