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Research Notes

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Head Start Administrative Practices, Director Qualifications, and Links to Classroom Quality

An emerging body of research confirms practical wisdom from the field that center directors are the gatekeepers to quality. Through the teachers they hire, the administrative practices they put into place, and their ability to promote a shared vision, directors create professional environments that enable teachers to provide enriching learning environments for children. Recognizing the importance of program leadership, an increasing number of state initiatives are including a measure of administrative practices in their approaches to assessing and improving program quality across early learning settings.

To help inform these initiatives, this research examined how administrative practices in Head Start programs are related to classroom quality. The research also looked at director qualifications in Head Start programs to understand how specific dimensions of director qualifications are related to the quality of Head Start administrative practices and the quality of the classroom learning environment.

Sample and Measures

The sample for this study comprised 452 Head Start classrooms in 138 centers in Chicago. Approximately one-half of the centers were part-day. The majority of programs had four to five classrooms. The centers employed approximately 15 staff and enrolled, on average, 79 children. More than one-half of the programs (63%) were accredited. Centers experienced an average of 25% staff turnover during the 12 months prior to this study.

The *Program Administration Scale* (PAS) was used to assess the quality of administrative practices at each of the Head Start centers.¹ The PAS contains 25 items, organized into 10 subscales, with each item measured on a 1-7 scale; 1 indicating inadequate administrative practices and 7 indicating excellent administrative practices. The qualifications of the on-site administrator (Head Start director/manager) and classroom teaching staff were assessed using items from the PAS that measure the level of general education, specialized education in early childhood education or child development, and years of relevant experience. Directors were also assessed on their specialized education in program administration and on their professional contributions.

To assess classroom quality, each Head Start classroom was administered the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised* (ECERS-R).² The ECERS-R contains 42 items, organized into 7 subscales, with each item measured on a 1-7 scale; 1 indicating inadequate quality and 7 indicating excellent quality. Data were collected May 2006 through January 2007.

Findings

Are administrative practices predictive of Head Start classroom quality?

To address this research question, a multiple regression analysis, controlling for length of day, number of teachers, annual turnover rate, lead teacher qualifications, and child enrollment was conducted to understand whether higher PAS scores predicted higher ECERS-R scores. Mean PAS scores for this sample were calculated at 3.42 with scores ranging from 1.58 to 5.88 while mean ECERS-R scores were calculated at 4.20 with scores ranging from 2.41 to 6.12.

Results of the analysis indicated that administrative quality accounted for 26% of the variance in Head Start classroom quality ($t = 3.62, p = .0001$) demonstrating that administrative practices, as measured by the PAS, strongly influenced the quality of care that children receive in their classrooms.

Table 1. Distribution of Director Qualifications (n=138)

	Less than an A.A. degree	A.A. degree or higher	B.A. degree or higher	M.A. degree or higher
General education	9%	91%	62%	28%
Specialized ECE coursework	Less than 18 ECE credits 27%	21+ ECE credits 73%	24+ ECE credits 63%	30+ ECE credits 54%
Specialized management coursework	No credits in management 43%	9+ credits in management 57%	15+ credits in management 38%	21+ credits in management 15%
Experience	Less than 1 year experience 6%	1+ years experience 94%	3+ years experience 85%	5+ years experience 75%
Professional contributions			4+ professional contributions in the last 3 years 12%	6+ professional contributions in the last 3 years 5%

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What is the relationship between director qualifications and the quality of administrative practices?

To address this research question, an overall PAS score was calculated using all PAS items except staff qualifications. Correlations were then conducted between the different dimensions of director qualifications and PAS scores. Table 1 displays the percentage of directors who reached various professional development benchmarks.

Correlations revealed that higher-quality administrative practices were associated with directors who had an M.A. degree ($r = .22, p = .009$), had completed more management coursework ($r = .20, p = .018$), and had made more professional contributions during the past three years ($r = .248, p = .003$). Lower quality administrative practices were associated with directors who had completed less than 9 credits of management coursework ($r = -.185, p = .03$).

What is the relationship between director qualifications and Head Start classroom quality?

Correlations between ECERS-R scores and dimensions of director qualifications suggest that higher classroom quality is associated with directors who had a B.A. degree or higher ($r = .218, p = .01$), had completed 24 or more hours of ECE coursework ($r = .192, p = .02$), and had made at least four professional contributions during the past three years ($r = .20, p = .018$). Lower classroom quality was associated with directors who had earned less than an A.A. degree ($r = -.189, p = .026$).

What is the relationship between director qualifications and lead teacher qualifications?

Table 2 displays the qualifications of Head Start lead teachers in this sample.

Using a combined index of the dimensions of director qualifications noted in Table 1, correlations were conducted between director qualifications

	Less than an A.A. degree	A.A. degree or higher	B.A. degree or higher	M.A. degree or higher
General Education	30%	70%	31%	3%
Specialized ECE Coursework	Less than 12 ECE credits 30%	21-29 ECE credits 70%	30+ ECE credits 57%	State certification (Type 04) 13%
Experience	Less than 6 months experience 6%	6- 11 months experience 95%	1-2 years experience 91%	3+ years experience 86%

and lead teacher qualifications. Results of the correlations revealed that directors with higher educational qualifications were more likely to employ teachers who had higher levels of education. For example, nearly 60% of the lead teachers in this sample who had a master's degree or higher were employed in centers with directors who had a master's degree or higher.

Implications for Practice

The results of this research confirm that within Head Start programs, having sound administrative practices in place helps ensure that children receive the classroom experiences they need to thrive. However, this research also indicates that the average Head Start program has less than optimal administrative practices in place.

In recent months, the federal government has made substantial investments to support Head Start. The results of this research suggest that focusing attention on helping directors improve their administrative practices is a sound way to maximize this investment and ensure better classroom quality.

This research also suggests that when directors have an advanced degree and more management coursework, they are better able to implement sound administrative and hiring practices that support teachers in providing higher quality learning environments. Having more early childhood coursework also appears to be directly related to classroom quality, perhaps through a director's ability to translate theory into practice and provide reflective supervision. Consequently, all of the dimensions of director qualifications appear important to both center- and classroom-level quality. Future research, however, should examine the direct and mediated pathways between director qualifications and classroom quality.

References

1. Talan, T. N., & Bloom, P. J. (2004). *Program Administration Scale*. New York: Teachers College Press.
2. Harms, T., Clifford, R., & Cryer, D. (1998). *The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised*. New York: Teacher's College Press.

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