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Quality in Context—How Directors' Beliefs, Leadership, and Management Practices Relate to Observed Classroom Quality

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Research Notes

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Quality in Context—How Directors' Beliefs, Leadership, and Management Practices Relate to Observed Classroom Quality

Children's experiences in early childhood programs can impact their developmental outcomes. While some high-quality programs promote children's success in school and life, the majority of child care programs are of minimal to adequate quality.¹ A recent study conducted by researchers at the Urban Institute explored the seemingly simple question, why is there so much variation in program quality? The study focused on center directors—their beliefs and decisions, and the contexts within which they work. The goal was to identify what promotes quality in some centers and what hinders quality in others.²

Sample and Methodology

Interviews were conducted with 38 center directors to understand how they define quality and to learn about their program goals, vision, and the factors that support or hinder efforts to create effective programs. The centers they administer were chosen from four sites (Jefferson County, AL; Hudson County, NJ; King County, WA; and San Diego County, CA.) that range in population size, income, and poverty rates. The objective was to sample centers with the widest possible variation in program goals and strategies to achieve those goals.

Classroom observations were conducted using the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)* and the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R)*. Used together, these two measures provide a picture of the quality of the interactions between teachers and children and the quality of the materials and activities available in the classroom.

Conceptual Framework

The researchers used two conceptual frameworks related to human motivation to guide this study. The first framework is based on Maslow's hierarchy of human needs.³ Maslow asserted that higher-level needs (esteem, cognitive, aesthetic, and self-actualization) emerge only after lower-level needs (survival, safety, love, and belonging) are satisfied. The current study considered programmatic components that address each level of need and categorized directors according to the needs on which they focused in defining quality. The second framework utilized is based on the role that intrinsic beliefs and external knowledge play in shaping directors' view of quality. The directors' interviews were coded and then categorized into three groups: directors guided primarily by their intrinsic beliefs; directors in the process of learning; and directors guided by informed beliefs (who make programmatic decisions based on intrinsic beliefs integrated with outside knowledge).

Data Analysis

The data analysis included: transcribing interviews; scoring observation measures and categorizing the observed classrooms into three groups according to their relative observed quality; conducting individual case analysis; coding interviews into key themes; constructing a case-ordered predictor outcome matrix, comparing each of the three quality categories against the categories defined for each key theme; and, finally, testing and refining the results by returning to the individual case interviews to seek confirmation of, or contradictions to, the observed factors.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis demonstrated clear relationships between observed quality and certain factors in the conceptual framework. Directors with classrooms that were of the highest observed quality were more likely to

- express high expectations regarding staff qualifications and what staff should achieve for children;
- communicate respect for and a commitment to support staff;
- integrate new learning with their intrinsic beliefs to inform decision making;
- feel at ease financially or somewhat pinched with more resources than other centers;
- prioritize resource allocation to staff wages and benefits, and to professional development;
- emphasize the importance of good financial planning and management; and
- rely on external standards that exceed licensing requirements to shape program practices.

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Directors with classrooms that were of the lowest observed quality were more likely to

- express relatively low expectations regarding staff qualifications and what staff should achieve for children;
- base program decisions primarily on intrinsic beliefs;
- struggle with funding;
- emphasize programmatic goals and decisions related to meeting children's safety and belonging needs; and
- rely on licensing standards to shape program practices.

The interviews with directors highlighted the complexity behind the successful production of high-quality early care and education. Looking through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, child care centers as organizations move through a developmental process. Centers must first address their own safety and survival needs before they can address more complex organizational needs related to stakeholders' (staff, children, and families) need for esteem and cognition. Directors' beliefs also play a key role. When a director's intrinsic beliefs about good child development contradict the objectives associated with children's or staff's higher-order needs, this conflict should be addressed before quality improvement efforts can succeed.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Address multiple rather than single quality-related factors. Given the wide range of factors that seemed to support or inhibit the production of quality among programs in this research, the data underscore the importance of thinking comprehensively about quality.

Develop mechanisms to identify and address individual directors' obstacles to quality. Improving quality on a broad scale may require interventions that address the specific underlying obstacles that individual directors face in taking advantage of quality enhancement opportunities.

Expand efforts to address resource constraints. Financial stress not only constrains what directors are able to implement, it may even constrain the way directors think about quality. Helping directors with financial management through training and technical assistance may increase their capacity to successfully plan for and implement quality improvements.

Focus on directors' leadership skills and belief systems. Directors' leadership and management skills influence whether they are able to overcome financial constraints, have high expectations for teachers, and look to external standards beyond licensing to guide programmatic practice.

Support the role of directors in addressing staffing and labor pool shortcomings. Challenges around staffing relate to directors' leadership, motivation, beliefs, and ability to access and manage resources. Initiatives that help directors stretch their staff expectations and implement strategies to find and retain skilled staff could help address shortcomings in the supply of qualified teachers.

Build on systems of standards. Although directors complain about certain aspects of standards, most directors view standards as positively influencing quality. Enforcement systems should reach out with technical assistance to help struggling programs address the underlying obstacles to meeting standards.

The ability of child care center directors to implement effective early childhood programs is shaped by multiple contextual factors. To improve the quality of the largest number of programs, it is critical that quality initiatives take a comprehensive, flexible, and individualized approach.

Directors' leadership and management skills influence whether they are able to overcome financial constraints, have high expectations for teachers, and look to external standards beyond licensing to guide programmatic practice.

References

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For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.