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# Connecting the Dots: Director Qualifications, Instructional Leadership Practices, and Learning Environments in Early Childhood Programs

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# Research Notes

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## **Connecting the Dots: Director Qualifications, Instructional Leadership Practices, and Learning Environments in Early Childhood Programs**

It has long been assumed that directors are a linchpin to high-quality early care and education programs. However, research investigating the influence of director qualifications on instructional leadership practices and the quality of classroom learning environments is sparse. The research that has been conducted, however, supports conventional wisdom that better educated directors provide teachers with supervision that enables more effective classroom teaching.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the current study was to explore different aspects of directors' qualifications to determine how they relate to the quality of instructional leadership practices and the quality of the learning environment in center-based early childhood programs.

### **Sample and Methodology**

The sample comprised 564 center directors in 25 states representing the full spectrum of for-profit, nonprofit, full-day and half-day programs. Approximately one-half of the directors worked in centers that received funding through Head Start and/or state Pre-K. The remaining directors worked in programs that were funded primarily through parent tuition and/or child care subsidy. Thirty-one percent of the directors worked in centers accredited by NAEYC.

Director qualifications were assessed using Item 22 (Administrator) from the *Program Administration Scale (PAS)*.<sup>3</sup> This item taps into the multiple factors contributing to director qualifications including level of formal education, specialized training in ECE, specialized training in administration, management experience, and professional contributions.

To assess the quality of instructional leadership practices, three items from the PAS were used. Item 2 (Supervision and Performance Appraisal) was used to assess the degree to which the program had a system of observation, ongoing feedback, and support for teachers to improve their instructional practices. Item 10 (Screening and Identification of Special Needs) was used to assess the degree to which systems were in place to screen for and support children with special needs. Item 11 (Assessment in Support of Learning) was used to assess the degree to which standards, curricula, and child assessments were aligned and used to support learning. Each PAS item is rated on a 7-point scale with 1 representing *inadequate*, 3 *minimal*, 5 *good*, and 7 *excellent* quality practices.

NAEYC accreditation status was used as a proxy for the quality of the learning environment because NAEYC-accredited programs have demonstrated, through independent observation, the use of a developmentally appropriate curriculum and effective teaching practices.

### **Findings**

*How do the different factors contributing to directors' qualifications relate to the funding source of the program and its accreditation status?*

To address this question, frequency distributions were generated to determine the percentage of directors by center funding source and accreditation status who held different qualifications relating to their formal education, specialized training in ECE, specialize training in administration, management experience, and professional contributions. The following summarizes the key findings:

#### ***Formal Education***

- Overall, 55% of directors held a bachelor's degree or higher and 22% held a master's degree or higher.
- Directors of NAEYC-accredited programs as well as Head Start and Pre-K funded programs had somewhat higher formal education with 63% holding a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Directors of state funded Pre-K programs had the highest formal education with 35% having achieved a master's degree or higher. This contrasts sharply with directors of tuition and/or subsidy-funded programs where only 15% held a master's degree or higher.

#### ***Specialized Training in ECE***

- Across all program types, 56% of directors had completed at least 24 semester hours of college credit in early childhood or child development.
- The greatest difference emerged between directors of accredited centers and directors of programs funded primarily by tuition and/or subsidies. Only 53% of directors in tuition and/or subsidy-funded programs had completed at least 24 semester hours of credit in early childhood compared to 68% of directors in NAEYC-accredited programs.

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### *Specialized Training in Administration*

- Overall, one-third of directors had not completed any college coursework in administration.
- Slightly more than one-third (36%) had completed at least 9 semester hours of college credit and 14% had completed 21 or more semester hours of college credit in administration.
- Head Start directors were the least prepared in terms of specialized training in administration; 39% had not completed any college coursework in program management.

### *Management Experience*

- Overall, three-quarters of directors (76%) had at least five years of management experience. This pattern was similar across all program types.

### *Professional Contributions*

- Across all programs, only 15% of directors demonstrated commitment to the field by making at least 6 professional contributions within the past three years (e.g., engaging in advocacy, presenting at a conference, mentoring).
- Differences emerged particularly between directors working in centers supported primarily by tuition and/or subsidies with 21% making at least 6 professional contributions in the past three years compared to directors of Head Start programs with only 7% making at least 6 professional contributions during the past three years.

*How do the different factors contributing to directors' qualifications relate to the quality of instructional leadership practices and to the quality of the learning environment?*

To address this question, bivariate correlations were calculated between each aspect of director qualifications with PAS Items 2, 10, and 11 (quality of instructional leadership practices) and with NAEYC accreditation status (quality of the learning environment).

The results of the data analysis as shown in this table revealed that higher levels of formal education and specialized training in ECE are associated with centers that have higher quality instructional leadership practices and higher quality learning environments. In addition,

Director Qualifications	Bivariate Correlations			
	Instructional Leadership Practices			Learning Environment
	PAS Item 2	PAS Item 10	PAS Item 11	NAEYC-Accredited
Formal education	.14*	.15*	.22*	.18*
Specialized training in ECE	.08	.16*	.15*	.18*
Specialized training in administration	.19*	.01	.09*	.03
Management experience	.07	.06	.05	.05
Professional contributions	.22*	.03	.08	.07

\*  $p < .01$

directors' specialized training in administration and their professional contributions are related to higher quality instructional leadership practices such as instituting formal supervisory and performance appraisal processes that support teachers' competence and efficacy. Years of management experience were not related to higher quality instructional leadership practices or learning environments.

## **Discussion**

Mirroring previous research, the results of this study suggest that a director's formal education and specialized training in ECE and program administration may be important mechanisms for improving the instructional quality of early childhood programs. However, further research is still needed to understand the influence of director qualifications on effective teaching practices once other contextual factors are considered.

Results also indicate that a substantial number of center directors do not have the qualifications needed to be effective instructional leaders. As states create professional development systems and implement supports to improve workforce competencies, it will be important to provide incentives for center directors to encourage them to attain their baccalaureate degree and take specialized coursework in program administration.

## **References**

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