

Research Notes

Published by the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University

WINTER 2006

Directors and the Nonpursuit of NAEYC Accreditation: Varying Definitions of Quality

Across the country, early childhood programs have the option of going above and beyond state licensing requirements by working towards accreditation through the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, a division of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These accreditation standards are based on the current understanding of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood programs. Although NAEYC-accreditation is widely recognized as a key indicator of program quality, many directors choose not to pursue it. A recent study¹ was conducted to better understand the basis for this decision.

Methodology

This qualitative study looked specifically at eight program directors that had not pursued or achieved accreditation. The purpose of the study was to give voice to these directors and to examine how they understood the process of accreditation and its underlying philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). Participants were selected if they had chosen not to pursue accreditation, had discontinued the self-study process, or had been deferred during the validation phase. This study sought to determine what they saw as barriers to achieving accreditation or incongruities within their own belief system.

The primary form of data collection was a series of individual interviews conducted with the eight program directors over the course of two months. The interview questions were semi-structured and focused on definitions of developmentally appropriate practice and personal experiences with accreditation. All of the programs were visited and observed with specific questions asked relating to programming and organizational structure. Additionally, each participant was asked to fill out a brief survey to determine center descriptive information as well as information about their educational level and years of experience.

Emergent Themes

The directors in the study define developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as a flexible curriculum that allows the children to follow their interests. They agreed that it includes a hands-on instructional approach that encourages children to learn through play. Directors felt the positive aspects of DAP included: open-ended art, a curriculum that doesn't frustrate the children, a nurturing learning environment, and a family-oriented program where parents are considered partners.

- **Quality vs. accreditation surfaced as a contentious issue.** Directors believed that they ran developmentally appropriate programs. Since accreditation is based on developmentally appropriate practices, they attributed their lack of success in achieving accreditation to their assumption that accredited programs followed a different or a more rigorous definition of developmentally appropriate practice. Directors define DAP in terms of "doing what is best for their children" and what is best for their children is highly contextual. They felt strongly that it was possible to have a high-quality program that demonstrated solid best practices without being accredited.
- **Program structure was often an area that accreditation facilitators suggested needed to be changed to achieve accreditation.** The directors in this study responded with concern that doing so would impact their program quality. Although directors criticize programs that follow a "structured corporate curriculum," they insist that structure is necessary and disapprove of some accredited programs they perceive as chaotic. The directors argued that accreditation requires too much freedom, which they believe is not supportive of children's development. Free choice and free play environments are considered to mean the same thing. Several directors noted that extremes, whether structured or unstructured, are problematic and a balance should prevail.

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- ***Kindergarten readiness was a strong influence on their decisions about how to plan the curriculum for their preschool classrooms.*** Many elements of their program such as lengthy group instruction, the use of flash cards, and other teacher-directed activities are implemented to satisfy this concern. Directors believed that there was a need for teacher-directed activities. As one respondent said, "We do some things that NAEYC guidelines wouldn't approve of but I consider them appropriate based on the needs of the community."
- ***Personal experience working in an accredited program as a teacher did not necessarily convince the directors in this study that accreditation was worth the time and effort.*** While their experiences in accredited programs helped shape their beliefs about the positive aspects of DAP, putting DAP into practice was challenging. As one director stated, "I found that some things that we were learning in school were definitely hard to put into practice... In the book world, in the philosophical world, it sounded good but oftentimes when you try it on your own children it doesn't work."
- ***Stress on staff was another factor that prevented the directors in this study from completing the accreditation process.*** While they understood that any long-term, self-study process would entail work and some level of stress for staff, they felt that the amount of work expected to make the programmatic changes needed to achieve accreditation was simply too much. Some directors felt that even the mentoring and training support provided by local agencies was stressful because they were being asked to make changes they did not fully understand or philosophically embrace.
- ***Lack of accurate information about developmentally appropriate practice and how it related to NAEYC accreditation was also a concern for respondents.*** The majority of program directors interviewed in this study had a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Even so, they did not fully understand DAP and the value of the self-study process to achieve accreditation.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that some directors choose not to pursue accreditation because they believe they are already doing what is best for the children in their care. In general, their "anti-accreditation" stance revolved around a few major points. First, directors have different definitions of what constitutes quality and developmentally appropriate practice, and they do not believe that accreditation is supportive of their individual definitions. Additionally, teacher-directed activities and program structure are important to them and they are concerned that pursuing accreditation would force them to adopt a "free-for-all" atmosphere where time for "real" learning was reduced. These issues coupled with other concerns—their desire to promote kindergarten readiness, the lack of accurate information, the cost associated with pursuing accreditation, and their fear that the self-study process would impose unnecessary stress on their staff—were enough to deter them from pursuing accreditation.

This study offers the following suggestions for professionals who support the accreditation process:

- State explicitly that there are multiple pathways to achieving quality and developmentally appropriate practice. Stress the unique culture and context of each early childhood program.
- Be clear about what constitutes an appropriate level of structure in a developmentally appropriate program. Words such as *structure*, *routine*, or *free play* need to be clearly defined to eliminate confusion.
- Understand how personal experiences impact beliefs. Staff need to share these experiences, the good and the bad, in order to be able to implement new practices.
- Provide training for directors in leadership, supervision, and program planning. Directors need a specific set of skills to motivate and empower their teachers while they work through the self-study process.

1. Galuski, T. L. (2005). *Directors and the nonpursuit of NAEYC accreditation: Varying definitions of quality*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Buffalo.

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