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Professional Development Needs of Directors Leading in a Mixed Service Delivery Preschool System

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Abstract

This paper reports on an interview study with directors of Head Start and child care programs who are collaborating with local education authorities to provide publicly funded preschool in New Jersey, USA. A standardized interview protocol was utilized with 98 directors chosen to represent a range of center types from across the three main regions of the state. Interviews were conducted over the phone. The study examined the kinds of preparation that these directors received for their work as program leaders, the areas that these directors identified as strengths and weaknesses, and the kinds of professional development that they perceived as necessary to perform their jobs well. Results indicate that given the wide range of qualifications and work experiences among directors in this mixed service delivery system, targeted professional development focusing on both administration and early childhood content is needed. These findings suggest that policy makers and administrators of preschool programs should conduct needs assessments of their preschool directors and school leaders to ensure that professional development opportunities address different levels of experience and expertise appropriate for leaders working in these systems. Because of the complexity of leading programs with mixed sources of funding and policy mandates, it is also suggested that competencies be articulated for preschool leaders and that institutions of higher education develop early childhood leadership preparation programs.

Introduction

Preschool programs are seen as a key strategy for addressing achievement gaps between children of different economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Whitebook, Ryan, Kipnis, & Sakai, 2008) and as a means to capitalize on the learning that takes place in the early years for all children (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010). Numbers of children attending state-funded programs in the United States continue to increase each year. Whereas 700,000 3- and 4-year-olds attended a state-funded preschool program in 2001-2002, 1.2 million children attended a publicly funded preschool program in the 2008-2009 academic year (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansanelli, & Hustedt, 2009).

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To provide preschool programs, most states are utilizing a mixed service delivery system composed of existing providers of early education and care services (e.g., Head Start, child care, and public schools) in local areas.[1] The challenge in creating these systems is ensuring consistency in program quality when each of these preschool providers has traditionally differed in terms of governance, funding, and program standards. Improving the qualifications and expertise of the teaching workforce is the most common strategy used by policy makers to ensure a robust return on their investment in preschool regardless of auspice (Barnett, 2003; Bogard, Traylor, & Takanishi, 2008; Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008; Whitebook, 2003). Over the past decade, many policy initiatives have been directed toward this aim. Some states have

undertaken efforts to create specialized early childhood teacher certification programs, with many requiring preschool teachers to attain a bachelor's degree (Ryan & Ackerman, 2005). The federal Head Start program has set a goal of a four-year degree for 50% of its teachers by 2013.

Much of the empirical evidence suggests that teachers are pivotal to classroom quality (for reviews of the literature, see Barnett, 2003; Whitebook, 2003), but ensuring higher quality at the programmatic and systems level in this new era of early educational reform also necessitates visionary and skilled leadership (Goffin & Washington, 2007). Leaders[2] (directors, administrators, or principals) of preschool programs must not only improve and sustain quality in their own work environments but also collaborate with other leaders across differing programs, sometimes overseeing the implementation of two differing sets of standards (e.g., qualified teachers with a bachelor's degree in the 4-year-old room, teachers with minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential in rooms with children 3 and younger). Because governance of preschool programs in many states is given to local education authorities, child care and Head Start leaders also find themselves becoming translators of early childhood practices to public school administrators who may have little understanding of other early childhood programs or what is considered best practices for children younger than 5 years of age. At the same time, those who work in child care and Head Start may have little understanding of the local schools and their operation. For example, the recent Leadership to Integrate the Learning Continuum study (LINC, 2009) found that directors rarely engaged with teachers and administrators in their local schools.

To date, most of the research on publicly funded preschool is composed of state evaluations (e.g., Frede, Jung, Barnett, & Figueras, 2009; Gormley, Phillips, & Gayer, 2008; Hustedt, Barnett, Jung, & Friedman, 2010). These evaluations tend to examine classroom quality, teacher qualifications, and teacher expertise in relation to child outcomes, but they overlook the work of program directors or administrators. The research that exists on early childhood leadership tends to focus on the relations between program quality and the qualifications and experience of child care directors (Helburn, 1995; Bloom & Sheerer, 1992; Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004; Whitebook & Sakai, 2004). These studies show that better educated and consistent leaders positively influence children's experiences and outcomes. However, only a handful of studies have examined how child care directors approach their work (e.g., Muijs et al., 2004; Sanders, Deihl, & Kyler, 2007). While these studies provide some insight into the processes that center directors engage in as they lead, they focus on freestanding centers and therefore provide little information about leading a program as part of a larger mixed service delivery system.

The study reported in this paper examined the perspectives of a group of center directors working in the state-funded preschool program in New Jersey. Specifically, we sought to examine the kinds of preparation that these directors received for their work as program leaders, the areas that these directors identified as strengths and weaknesses, and the kinds of professional development that they perceived as necessary to perform their jobs well. In addressing these questions, our aim is to describe the expertise of center directors in this mixed service delivery system and to offer insights into the type of leadership preparation that is necessary for those on the front lines of preschool education. We contend that without attention to the professional development of leaders in these new preschool systems it will not be possible to achieve or sustain the level of program quality central to improved student outcomes.

New Jersey Early Childhood Context

New Jersey provides a unique context from which to examine the work of directors in a mixed service delivery system because of the *Abbott v. Burke* Supreme Court rulings (1998, 2000). In a series of New Jersey Supreme Court decisions, the 28 (now 31) urban school districts serving the state's poorest students were ordered to create systems of high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-old children, beginning in the 1999-2000 school year. High-quality programs were defined as having a class size of no more than 15 students, with one certified teacher and one assistant teacher per classroom. In addition, the Abbott VI decision in 2000 ordered that each program use a developmentally appropriate curriculum linked to the state's core curriculum content standards and provide adequate facilities, special education, bilingual education, transportation, and health services. In 2010-2011, the projected enrollment of the state preschool program is 44,152 children (E. Wolock, personal communication,

February 14, 2011), and over half of these children are served in private centers.

The New Jersey Department of Education (2004), through its Office of Early Childhood Education, is responsible for the implementation and governance of the preschool system and has developed a distinct set of early learning expectations for preschool children (*Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality*), and *Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* (New Jersey Department of Education, 2003) to guide school district administrators through the decision-making and budgetary considerations that lead to high-quality preschool practices. The lead agency for child care, including Head Start, is the responsibility of the Department of Human Services.

Local education officials are responsible for overseeing all publicly funded preschool programs at the community level. To meet this responsibility, each of the 31 districts has developed early childhood administrative and technical assistance teams. These teams include a person designated as the district's early childhood supervisor, whose responsibilities encompass developing the district's program improvement plan and accompanying budget and overseeing professional development experiences for the district's preschool teachers. Each district also has a group of master teachers who report to the early childhood supervisor and who work directly with preschool teachers and directors on curriculum implementation and improving their teaching.

Any director leading an Abbott program is required to ensure that his/her staff in the Abbott classrooms have attained the appropriate qualifications, are implementing a state-approved curriculum model, and are working with children in ways that meet state standards. Directors are required to report how they spend the funds that they receive and are usually expected to meet regularly with the early childhood supervisor and/or master teachers. In centers that include both publicly funded preschool classrooms and classrooms serving children not enrolled in these Abbott programs, directors work under multiple sets of policies and have to report to more than one oversight body. For example, Head Start directors have to complete budgetary paperwork both for their own sponsoring agency and for the Department of Education as well as supervise teaching staff working under differing expectations and with varied qualifications. Despite the complexities of the leadership role, directors of Abbott programs are not required to have any specialized qualifications other than completing a Directors' Academy, which consists of 45 hours of training in child care center administration, management, and leadership.

In its ninth year of implementation when this study was conducted, with much of the start-up "noise" that accompanies new initiatives having died down, the experiences of directors leading in this established preschool system can offer insights for other states about how best to support leaders to implement high-quality programs. In the next section, we outline the method used to tap directors' experiences in this preschool system.

Method

A telephone survey composed of both open- and closed-response questions was conducted to describe the directors and their experiences supervising Abbott preschool classrooms in their centers.

Sample

The New Jersey Department of Education provided the research team with contact information and basic program data for the 630 Abbott preschool program sites. Because we were interested in interviewing directors of nonschool-based programs, the 190 school-district-run sites were eliminated from the population of centers. Therefore, we drew our sample of participants from the remaining 440 centers (Head Start and child care centers) offering publicly funded preschool. We purposefully included those districts that served at least 50% of children in private child care or Head Start organizations and in which there were more than 5 private child care or Head Start organizations. Across these 16 districts, there were 405 private child care and Head Start centers, administered by a total of 270 directors or executive directors. Executive directors managed multiple sites, whereas directors were responsible for one site only. We targeted interviews with 125 of these 270 eligible respondents.

Our intent was to interview directors or executive directors from sites across the state and from a wide variety of school districts and organizational structures, allowing us to compare responses among similar groups and across groups. To accomplish this goal, we created 21 sampling groups by

categorizing the universe of sites into seven organizational structures (see Table 1) in three regions of the state (see Table 2), with multiple school districts within each region. We targeted up to seven completed interviews in each sampling group. If there were seven or fewer respondents within a sampling group, we attempted interviews with all respondents. In the larger sampling groups, we sampled respondents in a school district proportionally to the school district's occurrence in the universe.

Table 1
Interviews by Organizational Type*

Organizational Type	Completed Interviews
Single sites: Abbott classrooms only	8
Single sites: Mixed Abbott and non-Abbott classrooms	21
Multiple sites: Abbott only	7
Multiple sites: Mixed Abbott and non-Abbott	13
Part of multiservice organization: Abbott only	14
Part of multiservice organization: Mixed Abbott and non-Abbott	23
Head Start centers	12
Total	98

*Note: Single-site centers means that the director ran one center only. Directors of multiple sites are leaders of more than one center. Multiservice organizations offered child care as one of many services, such as the YMCA.

Table 2
Completed Interviews by Region of the State*

Region	Completed Interviews
South and Central	30
North 1	44
North 2	24
Total	98

*Note: Because there are many more Abbott districts in the northern part of the state than in other parts of the state and we wanted to include directors in every Abbott district and from across the state, we had two northern sampling groups—one for the upper north of the state and the other for districts located toward the central part of the state.

We dialed 172 directors using this sampling design and completed 98 interviews, for an overall completion rate of 57%. Only 2% of the centers were ineligible to participate, either because the center was out of business or because it was no longer serving as an Abbott preschool site. The most common reason for nonresponse was "respondent not available." Generally, in these cases, we talked with a secretary or receptionist but were unable to make contact with the respondent, or the respondent repeatedly asked the interviewer to call back to schedule an interview at a later date.

Eighty-nine percent of interviews were conducted with directors or executive directors of organizations. The remaining interviews were conducted with individuals serving in another administrative capacity for their centers, such as directors of education, directors of academic affairs, or program supervisors.

As Table 3 shows, the mean age of directors in our sample was 50.4 years. Slightly more than one-half of directors we interviewed identified themselves as Black or African American; less than one-quarter were White, non-Hispanic; 11% were Latino or Hispanic; and 11% identified themselves as being of another ethnicity, including Asian American, or of more than one ethnic group. All directors reported speaking English fluently, and 18% reported speaking Spanish fluently. Fewer than 5% reported speaking a language other than English or Spanish fluently.

Table 3
Demographics of Directors in the Sample
(*N* = 98)

Director Characteristics	Mean/Percent

Mean age	50.4 (SD = 9.63)
Female	87
Male	13
Ethnicity	
African American	55.1
White, non-Hispanic	22.4
Latina/Hispanic	11.2
Other	11.2
Languages spoken fluently	
English	100
Spanish	18

Data Collection

Telephone interviews, averaging 30 minutes, were completed with 98 directors between February 20 and May 4, 2007. Initially, we made telephone contact with the director or executive director to explain the purpose of the study and to encourage participation. We offered to schedule the interview at the respondent's convenience, including before, during, or after the work day, as well as during the weekend. When a respondent agreed to participate, we scheduled a time and date for the telephone interview. We then sent the respondent a letter describing the study in more detail, along with a reminder form highlighting the date and time of the scheduled interview. We also placed a reminder call the day before the scheduled interview. If the respondent was not available to complete the interview at the scheduled time, we made an additional seven attempts to reschedule the interview.

Telephone interviews were conducted by the authors and staff at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. All interviews were conducted in English and were professionally recorded and transcribed, with the permission of the respondent. The interviews took an average of 30 minutes to complete. The structured interview protocol included a range of demographic, experience, opinion/value, and knowledge questions (Patton, 2002) organized under several general topics that included reasons for becoming an Abbott program, the impacts of new policies on program operation, and directors' experiences and challenges working with the school district. A final set of questions focused on the directors themselves, seeking demographic information, professional preparation, professional characteristics, and the challenges that they faced in their work as directors of Abbott sites. These final responses constitute the focus of this paper.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed in three phases by the same team members who conducted the interviews, who are also the authors of this paper. The first phase involved inductively coding all the open-ended questions to establish recurring categories that captured the meanings expressed by participants. Team members individually read and coded 15% of the interviews. The team then met and compared codes assigned for each interview question. Where there were points of disagreement, the team selected the code that reflected their consensus. The team then read additional transcripts. Once these categories became saturated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we had the final coding scheme for each question, which was then used to analyze all remaining transcripts. To ensure the validity of the coding scheme and its application, 10% of all interviews were double coded.

The second phase involved data entry of both open- and closed-ended questions into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 14.0). Frequencies were then conducted to determine trends in the data for both kinds of questions.

In the third phase, the data for open-ended questions were sorted according to their assigned codes. Using the process of categorical aggregation outlined by Stake (1995), the chunked excerpts of text related to each code within a question were then read carefully—first, to generate a sense of the meanings given to the code across all participants and, second, to ascertain whether there were any differences among particular kinds of sites. Team members then generated a summary narrative of the

data pertaining to each question, paying attention to the frequency of codes as well as to what was said by participants in differing sites.

Findings

The findings are presented in relation to each research question. First, we examine the kinds of preparation that these directors received for their work as program leaders. We then explore directors' self-perceptions about their areas of strength and weakness as leaders. Finally, we examine the kinds of professional development that these directors perceived as necessary to perform their jobs well. Throughout the presentation of findings, quotes from participants are included as evidence of the logic underpinning our interpretations.

Preparation to be a Leader in a Mixed Service Delivery System

While it is mandatory that all teachers in the public preschool or Abbott program have a bachelor's degree and P-3 certification, there are no similar requirements for directors in community-based Head Start or child care settings that house Abbott classrooms. Instead, as mentioned previously, directors of these centers with Abbott classrooms are required to attend a Directors' Academy consisting of 45 hours of training in child care center administration, management, and leadership. In order to examine directors' preparation to be leaders of public preschool programs in a mixed service delivery system, we asked participants a series of questions about their qualifications, work experience, and participation in the Directors' Academy.

Qualifications. More than three-quarters of the directors we interviewed reported completing a bachelor's degree or higher, with almost one-half (46.9%) having completed a bachelor's degree and slightly fewer holding a master's degree or higher (39.8%). Forty percent of directors who had earned a bachelor's degree or higher had done so in a field other than early childhood or business; these areas included human development, psychology, and science. As can be seen in Table 4, a little over a quarter of directors (28.3%) had earned their bachelor's degree or higher in early childhood education, while a smaller number had earned a degree in education (14.1%) or in business administration (17.6%). Slightly more than one-half of directors with a bachelor's degree or higher were certified to teach children. The most commonly reported certification was preschool to grade 3; a smaller number had kindergarten to grade 8, nursery school to grade 8, or other type of certification.

Table 4
Type of Degree Earned by Directors in the Sample with a
Bachelor's Degree or Higher (*N* = 98)

Degree Type	Percentage of Directors
Early childhood education	28.3
Education	14.1
Business	17.6
Other	40.0

Over half of those directors with a degree in education also reported having completed 15 credit hours or more in business administration, accounting, or education administration. Directors with degrees in business administration, accounting, or education administration were asked whether they had also completed 15 credit hours or more in early childhood education. About three-quarters reported having done so. Of the small number of directors (13.3%) with some college or an associate's degree, most reported having completed 15 credit hours in training to assist them with their work, whether it was in early childhood education, education, business administration, accounting, or education administration.

Professional Experience. As can be seen in Table 5, a little over half of the directors interviewed had been employed in their centers for more than 5 years.

Table 5
Teaching Experience of Directors in the Sample (*N* = 95)

	Percentage

Teaching Experience	of Directors
No experience	36.8
Experience as elementary school teacher only	4.2
Experience as child care teacher only	46.3
Experience as both elementary and child care teacher	12.6

Nearly one-half (46.3%) of the directors had worked as child care center teachers only, a small number (4.2%) had worked as elementary school teachers only, and some had held both positions (12.6%). Directors who had worked as child care teachers had an average tenure of 5.7 years in such work. About one-third of directors (38.8%) had no prior experience as elementary or child care center teachers. Similarly, more than one-third of interviewed directors reported that they had not had any experience as directors prior to their current positions.

Directors' Academy. The Directors' Academy is a series of courses (totaling 45 hours) focused on administration. The Directors' Academy is offered throughout the state, and the courses are delivered by a variety of organizations, including child care resource and referral agencies, two-year colleges, and other professional development organizations, each of which designs its own curriculum and delivery mechanism. Directors received full scholarships to attend the Directors' Academy. Three-quarters of directors in the sample who were required to attend the Directors' Academy reported having done so. Executive directors of multiple-site organizations were not mandated to attend the Academy and were ineligible for scholarships. About one-half of the executive directors of multiple-site organizations reported having participated voluntarily.

Nearly all of these participants found that the Directors' Academy provided information helpful to their jobs. Most directors who participated in the Academy cited its subject matter as a strength. For some directors, content pertaining to the overall management and administration, or "the nuts and bolts of the business," of a preschool site was helpful. A director commented that this included "all the areas that a director should be knowledgeable and comfortable about in terms of management, finances, relationships, and networks." Directors also cited the importance of receiving information specific to the rules and regulations of the Abbott preschool program. As one director responded, "With the DHS and the Abbott contracts, there are special guidelines for each contract. The Directors' Academy prepared me for that." Some directors, despite substantial experience and education, found the Directors' Academy valuable because it helped them refresh their knowledge and learn about new developments: "If you've been in child care for a long time, a lot of it you knew; it was just refreshing, bringing you up-to-date on some of the things that you know about, keeping you abreast of everything that was coming down the pike."

Directors also mentioned appreciating the content provided through the Academy related to facilities, nonprofit legal issues, human resources, curriculum, working with children and families, and working with school districts.

About one-third of directors cited the opportunity to network with and learn from other Abbott directors, emphasizing the "camaraderie of having other directors there and the interaction between the different directors and centers." Even the few directors who did not find the Academy very helpful personally still recognized that it was important for others who were new to the field:

> Because I took it late in life, it wasn't [very helpful]. I had been a director so long that it was like a refresher course where you say, okay, yes, I've been doing that. But for new directors who have not had a lot of experience, I think it's excellent.

Professional Development Needs of Directors

A leader's sense of self-efficacy or belief in oneself to perform a task is a key mediator of how she or he functions in the workplace (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Therefore, in order to identify what may be some common professional development needs of directors working in this mixed service delivery system, we first asked interviewees, "What do you think are your strengths as a director?" before asking them to identify areas where they perceive they need improvement.

Strengths as a Leader. Nearly every director responded to this question, and many respondents

mentioned having more than one strength. Nearly one-half of directors identified their ability to lead others as a strength. These directors identified skills such as developing and maintaining positive relationships with staff; the ability to set clear expectations, to support and motivate staff to work effectively and continue their education, to relate to staff on a personal and professional level, to manage staff conflicts, and to communicate effectively. As one director put it,

> To support the staff, my office is always available to them. To create a team atmosphere and a family atmosphere where everyone is comfortable coming to work every day. Making sure that the teachers believe in themselves and believe in what they are doing. I always want to give my teachers the chance and the opportunity to make their own choices and to learn from those choices, and learn from mistakes made by me or by them, and just grow from it.

Some directors discussed how positive staff relationships were based on their own background in early childhood education—"the fact that I can talk to my teachers and tell them, 'I've been there, done that, because I was a teacher myself,'" as one director said.

More than one-third of directors identified their administrative skills—the ability to manage and run their centers effectively—as a strength. One director stated, "I think that because I've had a background as an educator and formal administrator, that is really a strength." Directors also highlighted specific administrative and management skills such as setting up policies and procedures, human resource management, the ability to manage change, developing and implementing projects, and compliance with contractual requirements and expectations. Some directors mentioned fiscal skills such as accounting, fiscal management, or budgeting, but only one in 10 directors mentioned their knowledge and experience related to early childhood education or teaching practices as strengths.

Slightly more than one-half of directors mentioned various personal characteristics as strengths. Many of these directors talked about attitudes, specifically a commitment to the children they serve. As one director said, "I maintain a focus on the children, and I fight for what these kids need." Others referred to personal characteristics that helped them with their jobs, such as being able to "juggle a variety of skills"; being "compassionate, reliable, easy to talk to, a great listener, hard working, a team player"; being a "visionary and great leader"; being able to "deal with everybody"; and being "structured and organized."

About one-quarter of directors discussed their positive relationships with the community and families that they served. One director talked about being "very well known in this community. We have no problem enrolling, and we get almost all our enrollees through referrals." Another spoke of her ability "to go out there in the community and rally, rally, rally people in the area, to support and fund us for things that we need, above and beyond the budget that's supplied." Directors also talked about identifying with the families that they served; one director cited her "strong desire to work with low-income families, because I'm from a low-income family." This was echoed by another director, who spoke of her "awareness and empathy for parents and their needs gained from my life experiences as a working mother who has gone through many changes with her children."

Where They Could Improve. Most of these directors identified at least one area in which they were not confident, and nearly all identified additional knowledge or skills that would be helpful to them. Many directors cited areas related to program administration and management or areas related to early childhood education. A smaller percentage of directors talked about working with families, computers and technology, or facilities.

Almost one-third of directors talked about a lack of confidence in the fiscal arena, including budgeting, accounting, and fund-raising. Many responded that they relied on other staff who had greater expertise and interest in this area. As one director put it, "I'm still learning the financial aspect of it. We have someone who handles this, but when he starts talking to me, I just say okay, so I really need to learn more in that area." When asked about the additional knowledge or skills that would be helpful to them in their jobs, about one-third of directors responded that they would like to improve their fiscal skills, including working with electronic spreadsheets, being more knowledgeable about funding sources and grant writing, understanding accounting principles, creating budgets, and developing budget strategies to maximize financial resources.

A small number of directors mentioned human resources—including hiring, disciplining, firing, evaluating, and supervising staff—as an area in which they felt unconfident or would like more knowledge and skills. Several cited either their overall role as a manager or their specific management skills as an area in which they felt unconfident, with some mentioning this as an area in which they would like more knowledge or skills. As one director commented,

> Sometimes, I feel that I don't get enough time to go into the classes, because we have so much paperwork. I try to visit as much as I can, even if I do little walk-arounds and go and sit in. So, I think that's an area where I'm not as confident, because I don't get enough time in there.

In addition to leadership skills, some of the directors mentioned lacking confidence in areas related to early childhood education, including lack of knowledge of child development theory, the curriculum, and working with children with special needs. Directors also talked about their lack of hands-on teaching experience:

> Probably my [least confident area] is the teaching skills, because I never taught. I really rely on my teachers, and they appreciate that, because I give them free rein to do what they need to do. I think they appreciate that I rely on them for their educational background.

Although only a small percentage of the directors mentioned early childhood education as an area in which they felt unconfident, nearly one-third cited this as an area in which they would like more knowledge or skills. Directors specifically mentioned learning more about children with special needs, the curriculum, current research on brain development, and child development. Some emphasized the importance of having as much knowledge as their teachers in this area:

> I think [we need] ongoing training for directors from the district in regards to what they want to see in the classroom, because curricula and approaches to learning are constantly changing. Even though I have a background in teaching, what was five years ago isn't what it is now. Our teachers are being trained in new developments made to the curriculum, and it would be nice for us to be trained before that, so we can ensure that it is being implemented in our classrooms.

Preferred Forms of Professional Development

Because little has been written about effective approaches to leadership development in the early childhood literature, we asked directors, "In what ways do you prefer to attain knowledge or skills?" Many directors had more than one response. In contrast to research on effective professional development that suggests that training should be targeted to the context and needs of individuals and should include opportunities for ongoing reflection and practice (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001), almost three-quarters of the directors who responded to this question preferred workshops, trainings, or seminars. A much smaller number were interested in one-on-one training, and a few cited credit-bearing formal education, online training, or other methods (see Table 6).

Table 6
Directors' Preferred Methods of Training and Education (*N* = 83)

Methods	Percentage of Directors
Workshops, trainings, seminars	74.7
One-on-one training	25.3
Formal credit-bearing education	15.7
Online training	14.5
Other types of training	12.0

Yet when we asked more focused questions about improving the training that they had received in the Directors' Academy, the responses resonated with newer models of professional development (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Directors spoke more about tailoring the professional development to the range of experience levels among them and to the specific requirements of leading a publicly funded preschool program as part of a mixed service delivery system. As one director said, "You need to evaluate who you're speaking to, your audience." Another said,

> There should be a basic Directors' Academy for those who don't have a degree or don't have training in child development. And there should be a second Directors' Academy, maybe a Directors' Academy Two, where directors who already have formal education can really go in and learn more about developing curriculum. So, step it up quite a bit.

Other directors recommended more advanced courses for all directors. As one director said, "Let's go up to a graduate level and have someone who knows what's going on far better than I." Directors also recommended continuing refresher courses. One suggested, "I think it needs to be ongoing, monitored, maybe every two to three years, to keep people current." Resonating with this idea, one director said, "It needs to be longer, because it was too much information to process in a short period of time."

Some directors also recommended that one way to improve the preschool program would be to improve the qualifications and expertise of center directors. One director said, "There's really no training available for the directors; it's more along the lines of just meetings." A number of directors proposed that they receive support to pursue formal education. In the words of one director, "They provide funding up to $5,000 a year for the teachers and the assistant teachers to go back to school. They should do the same thing for the directors who want to continue their education." Others concurred, perceiving a lack of equity between directors and teaching staff in the current arrangement. As one director noted,

> I think they should create a scholarship for directors to go back to school. We have a lot on our shoulders. I'm attending a master's degree program at College of St. Elizabeth, and I'm paying out of my pocket. I have two teachers that make more money than I do. And I have a lot of responsibility.

Discussion

Directors play a major role in building and sustaining high-quality early childhood programs. Higher-quality centers have been found to employ directors with longer tenure at their sites, more years of formal early childhood training, and more prior experience in child care programs (Helburn, 1995; Whitebook & Sakai, 2004). Yet much of the discussion about ensuring high-quality preschool has been about the professional development of teachers and not about those who supervise them. The perspectives of the directors in this study attest to the fact that they too have professional development needs in operating programs within a publicly funded, mixed service delivery preschool system. Meeting these professional development needs requires both short term and longer term responses from administrators and policy makers implementing such programs.

Unlike K-12 education where leaders typically have teaching credentials and extra coursework in supervision, there are no agreed upon standards or common qualifications for leaders in programs serving children birth to 5 years. The directors in this study, for example, ranged widely in terms of level of education, area of expertise (early childhood, business administration, or other), and teaching and/or child care experience. Therefore, a short term response to the professional development needs of directors is to create a targeted program of training that can help to fill in some of the gaps that directors have in their expertise. The findings of this study would suggest that such a program of leadership training must include not only a focus on policy and general administration issues but must also incorporate early childhood content, especially for those leaders who have not worked in the field as teachers. Conducting a needs assessment is one way to ensure that the professional development program is suited to the particular needs of local leaders. Learning about directors' qualifications, training, and perceived professional development needs makes it possible to ensure that more experienced and less experienced directors receive content relevant to their particular level of

expertise.

A second and related short term response is to consider including all leaders within mixed service delivery systems in a targeted professional development program. The Directors' Academy that many in this study participated in was not designed for those who work in public schools, and yet it cannot be assumed that these leaders of preschool programs have a background in early education or the other sectors operating to provide preschool in a local district. A targeted series of professional development opportunities that ensure that all leaders, no matter their role or the auspice in which they work, are aware of the various regulations and policies associated with the preschool program and are up to date in their knowledge of early childhood can help to ensure consistency in program delivery.

Our findings suggest that, in addition to localized professional development responses, policy makers and those working in higher education should consider creating programs to meet the needs of early childhood leaders working in these mixed service delivery systems. Preschool is increasingly becoming the first year of school, mixed service delivery systems are a common policy solution, and some in the field are calling for P-3 systems—yet there are almost no preparation opportunities in higher education to help early childhood leaders learn how to lead effectively in these new systems. Currently, two kinds of leadership programs are available—those targeted to principals and supervisors in K-12 schooling and a smaller group of programs for directors in the child care sector (Goffin & Means, 2009). Neither kind of program addresses the needs of leaders in these new mixed service delivery early childhood systems. One way to motivate the development of such leadership programs would be to set competencies for preschool leadership positions and, as suggested by the participants in this study, provide supports for leaders to improve their qualifications and advance their skills.

When developing early childhood leadership professional development opportunities and programs of preparation in institutions of higher education, it is also essential that policy makers pay attention to building a linguistically and culturally diverse leadership. One of the benefits of implementing a mixed service delivery system such as the one in New Jersey is that many of the current leaders, unlike those in the public school system, are non-White. However, one of the lessons learned from trying to improve the qualifications of the teaching workforce in New Jersey has been that unless there is parity in salary, no matter where teachers work, some teachers will leave their local community centers to work in the public school system (Ryan & Ackerman, 2005). Therefore, as directors are encouraged to become more qualified, there also needs to be some consideration of how to retain and compensate a skilled and diverse cadre of leaders so that they don't leave for positions offering higher salaries elsewhere in the system (Whitebook, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2010). One such solution might be to link wages with educational attainment and scholarship money with a commitment to stay as the leader of a center for a particular time period.

Creating mixed service delivery systems is a logical and responsive way to provide preschool education to young children in the local community. Such a policy solution capitalizes on the strengths of existing programs and offers hope that transition between and across preschool and later school experiences can become more seamless. The success of these programs rests to a considerable degree on the abilities of program directors to lead the transformation of these programs. Paradoxically, the quality of the work environment and daily classroom interactions are threatened because policy initiatives pay little attention to directors' need for support and opportunities to learn. This study is limited by its focus on one state and the perspectives of center directors working in one mixed service delivery system. Further studies are needed that provide a better baseline of information about those who are leading in public preschool programs and their professional development needs. However, what is clear from this study is that preschool leaders want and need to improve their expertise if they are to successfully lead their staff in the change process as well as implement program guidelines.

Notes

1. Head Start is a federally funded early childhood program for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Its aim is to enhance children's cognitive and social development through the provision of education, health, and social services to eligible children and families. Child care programs provide full-day, out-of-home care to children birth to 5 years of age of working families and can be for profit or not for profit, part of a chain or owner operated. Preschool classrooms for 3- and 4-year-olds also take place in public elementary schools in some districts in New Jersey.

2. The term preschool leaders refers to individuals who oversee publicly funded preschool programs, including child care directors, Head Start directors, and school principals, among others. The focus of this paper is on child care and Head Start

directors.

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