

The Child Care Director: Not Just Anyone Can Do This Job!

by Pam Boulton

Holly came into my class wondering if this course would be worth the effort. Many workshops on administration had left her with little new knowledge and a feeling that no one seemed to appreciate what she did each day. She had been the director of a child care program for eight years, and as she

said, she "didn't want to take a class just to do her job." She crossed her arms, sat back in her chair, and gave me a look that dared me to tell her anything she didn't already know.

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Introduction

I greeted the class of 25 child care directors, telling them that we have seriously and systematically underestimated

what it takes to do their jobs. We were here, finally, to talk about what it *really* takes to run a child care business. We talked about how hard it is:

- To hear that "anyone" can do this job, and then find that because there is so little money and such minimal requirements that we sometimes actually look like just 'anyone' after all.
- To tell a mom that she can't bring her daughter anymore because her bill isn't paid, when we know that we are so important to her child (and she to us), and that we know that we are a major part of Mom's support system.
- To support teachers who are good-hearted, but don't really know what to do; others who work for us for six weeks, then leave; and ads in the paper that bring no applicants.
- To offer someone supporting a family a \$9.00 per hour job with no benefits.
- To offer high-quality programs for children and families.
- To supervise teachers as they work with children and families and recognize that this is different than teaching in your own classroom.
- To meet all of the requirements for licensing, USDA, rating scales, quality rating systems, and accreditation.
- To be leaders, accountants, managers, cooks, teachers, bus drivers, a shoulder to cry on, and a rock to depend on.
- To produce excellent quality programs with insufficient funds, and families unable to pay.
- To handle the fears and tears, and hope and joy, and smiles that stay with you forever.
- To appreciate what it really takes to do this job, and that absolutely — no kidding — just 'anybody' can't do it!

Slowly, Holly sat forward then softly said, "There's so much to learn, so much to *do!*"

Holly was in the first course of a six-course credential on child care administration at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Like more than 75% of her colleagues, Holly started out as a teacher. She has an AA degree in Early Childhood Education and taught in a three-year-old classroom for four years before she was asked to be the director. Her degree program included an overview course on administration with few specifics, and she wasn't planning on being a director when she took that course. She used the

knowledge she had built as a teacher to guide her in her transition to director. She has learned a lot on the job in the eight years she has been a director, but often wishes that she didn't have to always make it up as she goes along.

Holly is not alone. Despite the importance of the position, most child care directors have had no formal education in administration.

Directors as 'Gatekeepers to Quality'

Child care administrators are important. Paula Jorde Bloom (1992) refers to the director as the 'gatekeeper to quality' and Gwen Morgan (2000) writes of the director as the 'key to quality.' The child care director is responsible for every aspect of the early care and education program. What emerges is the picture of a complex job with an overlay of day-to-day detail, and a need to communicate and collaborate at every level with clarity and precision. The role is multi-faceted, ranging from basic sanitation to educational, fiscal, and legal responsibilities with far-reaching implications. It requires skill in communication, decision making, resource management, and leadership.

Child care directors feel the weight of the field on their shoulders. They are the ones who have to:

- Ensure that children are cared for, loved, nurtured, and educated while their parents make a living.
- Offer programs that meet children's needs for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth.
- Hire, train, evaluate, and support teachers who will work for very low wages, but provide exemplary care and education for children.
- Develop partnerships with families that include support and understand-

ing, flexibility and caring, education and hope.

- Meet standards in the form of state licensing, and other regulatory agencies.
- Run a business that sets, charges, and collects fees, and maintains financial integrity.

They are an integral part of their community, providing both services and leadership.

The need for training in child care administration

Most directors come to their positions from classroom teaching with little or no administrative experience. Many new administrators use the experience and practical knowledge they have stored as teachers to guide them as administrators. They behave as if they were expert in their new positions — or at the very least as competent — right from the start. While certainly relevant and applicable, their experience as classroom teachers is not sufficient to prepare them for their new role as director. Directors confirm the fact that their classroom knowledge and skills do not translate into the knowledge and skills necessary for effective administration (Jones, 2000).

Many excellent teachers flounder when they are promoted to director. Some question their own ability and commitment and ultimately leave the field. Others focus their attention on the classroom or curriculum and avoid the leadership, administrative, financial, family support, and community advocacy areas. As a result, many programs that may be excellent for children, fail because of inadequate visibility in their community, poor management, or lack of funds or leadership.

Directors' ongoing professional development

Directors are hungry for information, for growth, for validation, and for colleagues who share their commitment. Formal instructional opportunities that encompass all areas of the director's role are necessary: More information on financial management, systems and planning skills, personnel and human relations, marketing and community relations, as well as continued work in child development, curriculum planning and implementation.

Directors' needs differ depending on their backgrounds:

- Teachers, or those whose background is primarily classroom teaching, need coursework that not only introduces them to the administrative duties of a director, but also leads them to discover why the administrative areas are important, and how they relate to the delivery of a high-quality program.
- New directors need specific instruction on how to administer a high-quality program. They benefit from focused course content and the opportunity to connect with more experienced colleagues.
- Those who have been on the job for a number of years need the opportunity to test their knowledge and skills, to network with others, and to move beyond basics to a deeper level of understanding of their role.
- Others, such as assistant directors or students not yet working in early childhood programs who aspire to the position of director, need the same pieces already mentioned. They also need help determining if the director role is one they truly want.

Wisconsin's Directors' Credential Program

Coursework for early childhood teachers has been abundantly available, but course work for directors has been scarce, and largely overlooked and undervalued. The development of a credential specific to child care administration gives these dedicated, hardworking directors a place in the education system of their own. The Wisconsin Professional Credential for Child Care Administrators was developed to meet this need and is recognized by NAEYC as meeting part of the requirements for director qualifications in their accreditation process. Other states have developed administrative credentials as well. The Wisconsin experience is presented here for the purposes of illustration; other models may differ. The graduates of the first two cycles of training (including Holly) were asked about their experience.

Participants. Who are the directors who participate in the Directors' Credential Program?

- More than 80% of participating directors were teachers before assuming the director position, most for more than six years.
- Their previous formal education was largely related to teaching in early care and education.
- The sequence of courses in the directors' credential program was the first time most of them had spent any time considering, exploring, and learning about the most effective manner of managing the job, instead of 'just doing it.'

Training Benefits. The participants described the many ways that their participation in the directors' credential program had benefited them in their role. The program:

- Validated their knowledge of child development.

- Exposed them to new information about finance, community relations, and a systems approach.
- Contributed to their personal growth.
- Increased their personal confidence regarding their competence on the job.
- Led to positive changes in their own performance and in their programs.
- Deepened their appreciation for the value of learning.
- Helped them recognize the support a network of colleagues can offer.
- Validated their choice of profession and their ability to do the job.
- Contributed to greater respect for the field and for themselves as professionals.
- Helped them see themselves more clearly as leaders in their programs and in their communities (Boulton, 2002).

Child Care Action News (2002) describes the strategy of director credentials in the following way:

"It's not on the radar screen of most advocates. It's not even on the agenda of most people who now champion credentials for the nation's early educators. Yet it could be one of the most revolutionary strategies to improve early education. The strategy is director credentials."

Conclusion

It really is true: Not 'just anyone' can do this job well. It takes someone who is dedicated, insightful, committed, and educated. It takes someone like Holly who is not interested in wasting her time, but who is interested in changing her life and the lives of those around her. Holly will tell you that getting her administrator credential was worth the effort; it made a real difference in her program, and in her life:

"I still fondly reflect on the times we were all together, digging deep into our

experiences in early care and education, and pushing our thoughts further and further. There was so much that I learned, and am still learning! This was a real turning point in my career, strengthening and empowering. We all pushed ourselves, and came away with so much that words cannot possibly describe."

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