

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

Childcare Directors' Perceptions of the Past Decade and What the Future Holds

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In an effort to learn more about childcare directors' perceptions, this study surveyed seventeen directors in southwest Ohio. The participants were asked about specific challenges they have experienced over the last decade, and how they envision the future of childcare. The results revealed that the topics most commonly discussed by directors were related to teacher shortages, retention of staff, and an increase in children's behavior problems. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the issues mentioned by directors, especially with the addition of new state, federal, and licensing requirements. Many also feared the permanent closure of centers due to financial strains and a lack of resources at the state and federal level. The article concludes with implications for childcare directors to be able to move forward and continue providing high-quality care and education for children and families.

Keywords: childcare, behavior concerns, directors, teacher retention

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

Many children in the United States are spending at least part of their day in some type of childcare arrangement outside the home, including center-based care (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). As a result, childcare directors play a vital role in ensuring their centers provide high quality care and education for children and families. Directors are often tasked with leading their staff through challenging times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a national survey conducted by The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in March 2020, many childcare directors were unsure about the future viability of the entire early care field.

Childcare directors face multiple challenges including staffing issues and retention efforts. Teachers in early childhood education are some of the lowest paid professionals in the field of education (McDonald et al. 2018). As a result, many childcare teachers may be dependent upon other family members for financial support and basic living expenses. Low pay with increased responsibilities can lead to increased job stress. Research shows that prolonged teacher stress can result in a poor classroom emotional climate and low teacher responsiveness (Roberts et al., 2016).

Poor climate and responsiveness can have a negative impact on the interactions between children and caregivers and the overall quality of the center. Furthermore, Hale-Jinks et al., (2006) found that high turnover rates also lead to negative effects on young children (e.g. social emotional stress). Children who experience high turnover rates in childcare can have disrupted relationships with their caregivers, which can have a harmful impact on the attachment process. This leaves children vulnerable, and can affect their overall well-being and ability to learn (Cassidy et al., 2011). In addition, high turnover rates can also have adverse effects on caregiver stability and lead to insecure attachments in young children during their early years (Varnas & Cummings, 1993).

Due to the extended amount of time that children spend in childcare settings, children as young as three years old are being expelled from childcare at a rate three times greater than the rate of expulsions for K-12 students (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Without guidance and intervention, children with severe behavior problems tend to remain stable or even escalate over time, putting these children at greater risk for dropping out of school or requiring specialized educational services as they get older (Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). It is essential that childcare directors and teachers have the knowledge and skills to purposely design a classroom environment that will foster children's social emotional development (Kostelnik et al., 2007).

Arndt et al., (2021) suggested that perhaps there should be a discussion on ways to individualize job training rather than having general requirements that are the same for everyone. For example, if directors and teachers feel that they need more training and support to work with children who have behavior problems, they should receive professional development on this topic. This might allow for higher job satisfaction if directors and teachers are learning skills and information that relates to their specific needs.

CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of this study was to learn more about childcare directors' perceptions of the state of childcare. More specifically, the goal was to learn first-hand how childcare directors viewed the last decade, and how they envision the future of childcare. Participants in this study were childcare directors in southwest Ohio. Online surveys were sent to a total of 57 program directors, and 17 of those individuals completed the survey online through Qualtrics. The participants varied in age, level of education, and length of time in the childcare field. Participants were asked four survey questions which are listed in the Key Findings. When analyzing the survey data, the investigator searched for patterns (common themes) in the survey responses using a content analysis approach. Specifically, the data was analyzed using the following process:

- (a) prepare the data for analysis
- (b) become familiar with the data
- (c) identify units of analysis
- (d) define tentative categories for coding the responses
- (e) refine categories
- (f) establish category integrity (Johnson & LaMontagne, 1993)

KEY FINDINGS

The survey questions for this study are listed below, together with some of the most common themes that emerged from each survey question.

What are some specific changes you have witnessed over the last decade since you have been working in the childcare field?

- changes in state requirements including quality rating and improvement system (Ohio's Step Up to Quality – SUTQ);
- licensing requirements (related to COVID-19 pandemic);
- staff shortages and difficulty hiring qualified teachers – decrease in work ethic/dedication;
- high turnover rates of teachers and staff;
- alarming increase in behavior problems in children attending childcare.

What do you believe the childcare field will look like over the next five years?

- childcares have a critical need for additional funding and resources if the childcare field is to succeed and thrive;
- childcares must be able to adjust to new requirements and rules handed down by the state and federal government;
- more appreciation and professionalization of the childcare field is needed in the future.

What would you like to see changed or improved in the childcare field?

- better pay for high quality teachers/staff and ability to compete with other businesses (e.g. retail, restaurants, etc.);
- better teacher/staff benefits (e.g. health insurance, flexible work schedules, etc.);
- less frequent changes of state requirements, licensing, and rules;
- high quality professional development for all teachers/staff.

Do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future of childcare?

- directors were optimistic about: pandemic brought to light the importance of childcare (essential workers), society learning the value of quality childcare and preschool;
- directors were pessimistic about: lack of resources and supports, inability to find qualified teachers to hire, low pay for teachers, longer hours due to teacher shortage.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

In this study, childcare directors were asked about their views of the childcare field over the last decade, and how they envision the future. Hiring and maintaining qualified teachers was a significant concern discussed by many of the directors in this study. Ohio's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) strongly encourages and rewards programs for teachers possessing more education (e.g. associate degree, CDA). However, Thorpe et al., (2020) researched retention rates in childcares and found that those who were pursuing higher qualifications were likely to leave the field within the next twelve months. This data is concerning since our ultimate goal is to produce highly qualified teachers while keeping them in the field longer (to reduce the turnover rate). In regard to low pay and poor work conditions, teachers' satisfaction with their jobs does matter (Grant et al., 2019). Higher job satisfaction in turn leads to better retention rates. Developing some type of mentoring program might be an effective strategy to encourage relationships between teachers and provide the needed support. In addition, directors can also support their teachers simply by being physically present in classrooms on a regular or daily basis, which may be an added benefit for newer teachers.

Directors in this study voiced their concerns and felt their voices were not always heard by those individuals who were enacting new policies and requirements. Despite the importance of hearing from childcare providers to establish early education policies, some research shows that they are often not included in the conversation at the state or federal level (Van Laere & Vandembroek, 2017). Several of the directors mentioned that the people who make the policies for childcare centers are often out of touch with the real issues. Furthermore, directors and teachers should have a voice in the type of training and professional development they are required to complete.

The childcare field has certainly seen high and lows over the last decade, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several directors in this study felt positive about the future of childcare due to the important role they play in serving families and communities. For the childcare field to move forward in a positive and viable direction, there needs to be a stabilization of the childcare workforce, and more investments in behavioral supports and increased teacher compensation.

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