

# Professional Development Training for Administrators in the Early Childhood Education and Care Setting

## *A Research Brief*

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## ABSTRACT

Administrators and other professionals who support teachers in the early care and education setting are essential to the organization and climate of the center, the classroom environment, and the experiences of teachers, children, and families. The current qualitative study investigates the experiences of five Early Head Start administrators who participated in a 15-hour attachment- and relationship-based professional development training. Themes that emerged from analyses underscore the importance of the administrator's role in supporting teachers to integrate professional development content within their classrooms and highlight the powerful nature of participating in a training that is specifically designed and aimed at the complex role of the administrator. This study informs the field on the importance of providing professional development and support to early childhood education administrators and attending to all the complex and important relationships reflected within the early childhood setting.

## KEYWORDS

**Early Head Start, Administrators, Professional Development, Qualitative Study**

**E**arly childhood education and care (ECEC) program administrators, classroom coaches, and teacher consultants play a key role in program quality and teacher well-being (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Jorde Bloom & Able, 2015), including their efforts to support, motivate, and empower their teaching staff (Coleman et al., 2015). While professional development (PD) interventions often focus on teacher well-being en route to improved classroom quality (Cumming, 2017), increasing teachers' coping strategies and stress management may not be sufficient to promote teachers' sustained well-being and high-quality classroom practices.

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Specifically, ECEC classrooms do not exist on their own; they are embedded within multifaceted program contexts which contain complex sets of relationships and systems (e.g., Cumming & Wong, 2019) that can support, or undermine, teachers' well-being, classroom practices, and ability to apply what is learned through PD (Koplow et al., 2020; Kuh, 2012). Just as teachers set the emotional and relational tone of their classrooms, which affect children's behavior and development, so do administrators set the relational tone within ECEC programs, which may influence teachers' well-being and classroom practices.

Teachers strive to co-construct the warm and secure relationships that promote child development. In the infant and early childhood mental health field, "how" teachers and caregivers are with children (the relational nature of their interactions) has long been considered as important as what they "do" with children (the learning experiences offered to support learning; Pawl & St. John, 1993). In parallel, we posit that "how" administrators are with teachers is a vital element in what they "do" with teachers. It is not enough for administrators to "buy in" to training that supports teacher well-being and practices, they must work to create a climate that supports the administrator-teacher relationship and allows teachers to fully benefit from training and coaching. This professional climate includes developing warm and authentic teacher-administrator relationships, enabling access to trusted support staff who support teachers' learning, and having opportunities to make mistakes without fear of discipline (Wanless & Winters, 2018). Aubrey and colleagues (2013) note that ECEC programs characterize complex systems that are both hierarchical and collaborative with "multiple and diverse relationships" (Colmer, 2015, p. 34), suggesting the importance of attention to relationships between administrators and teachers.

Hearts & Minds on Babies (HMB) is an attachment and mindfulness-based training series (Authors, masked for review), tested in Early Head Start (EHS) programs. HMB was adapted from an evidence-based, multifamily parenting and mental health intervention, named Mom Power (Muzik et al., 2015; Rosenblum et al., 2017, 2018), and is part of a set of interventions/training curricula that fall under the umbrella Strong Roots Parenting Programs™ (see webpage [www.zerotothrive.org](http://www.zerotothrive.org) for details). HMB began as a professional development training for teachers (HMB+T) and parents (HM-

B+P); and was developed, implemented, and evaluated as part of an implementation research study. Early on, it became clear that administrators needed to learn the HMB concepts, to better support their teachers in implementing HMB in the classroom. Thus, a training aimed at administrators (HMB+A) who support teachers in the classroom was developed and piloted alongside HMB+T and HMB+P. The HMB+A curriculum includes 15 hours of PD for administrators across four sessions to learn the core concepts of HMB Strong Roots concepts and put them into practice in their work with teachers and parents.

### Current Study

The current qualitative study aimed to understand the experience of EHS administrators who participated in HMB+A. Research questions focused on their experience participating in an attachment- and mindfulness-based training series aimed at strengthening relationships and supporting well-being:

1. How do Early Head Start (EHS) administrators describe their experience participating in an attachment and mindfulness-based professional development training?
2. How can HMB concepts - which were developed to strengthen relationships between young children and their teachers/caregivers - be applied by administrators to strengthen relationships with teachers?

To answer these questions, we conducted individual interviews with five EHS administrators. The interviews were completed in July 2020 and were conducted via telephone because of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the participants identified as female, 2 identified as Black or African American, 2 identified as White, and 1 preferred not to identify her race. Two participants held master's degrees, 2 held associate degrees, and one did not provide their level of education. Their years of experience in the ECEC field ranged from 9 - 40 years.

Individual interviews were conducted using a semi-structure interview protocol and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research coding team used inductive thematic analysis to capture and understand the participants' experiences and perspectives of the HMB+A training.

### Key Findings

This study's purpose was to understand administrator experiences of the HMB+A training and whether and how they were able to use the HMB concepts within their relationships with teachers in their centers. First, administrators identified two main themes related to their experiences participating in HMB+A. First, HMB+A was critical to the implementation of the HMB+T and HMB+P curricula in their programs. Administrators articulated that HMA+A helped them to support teachers' use of HMB concepts in the classroom, through promoting an understanding and shared language and supporting their capacity to take the teacher's perspective. Second, the administrators stressed how important it was to be part of a dedicated training group for ECEC leadership. The HMB+A group provided them with a safe space to discuss their job and its complex challenges. Further, engaging in this way with administrative peers highlighted the importance of self-care for ECEC leadership.

Administrators identified core HMB concepts that crossed over and were applicable in their leadership roles, helping them to better understand and support their staff. Study participants noted that HMB concepts helped them to be more trauma-informed in their work with teachers as well as children and families, which promoted an understanding that they needed to focus on the teachers' emotional needs as well as the children's needs. Further, HMB concepts promoted perspective taking, self-reflection, patience, sensitivity, and the capacity to stop and think before reacting. Thus, HMB concepts were applicable in their work with teachers and supported their relationships.

Lastly, two additional themes emerged that are important to consider when providing PD in the ECEC setting. First, cultural and racial experiences will affect how the concepts are perceived, learned, and integrated into work with children, families, and teachers. Participants in this study helped us to consider and think deeply about how HMB concepts are presented and discussed among racially and culturally diverse administrators, staff, and families. Relatedly, administrators also identified that an open-minded stance is important to embrace the HMB concepts. Administrators talked about attitudes and experiences as central to how HMB concepts may be perceived and utilized. Spe-

cifically, they spoke about openness to learning and prior experiences, particularly around race and culture, that are important for developers and trainers to consider in how administrators and teachers perceive the HMB curriculum and put HMB concepts into practice.

### Summary

Findings from this study suggest that the HMB+A professional development training was relevant to the work of administrators in the ECEC setting. Administrators helped us to understand the importance that they learn, understand, and put into practice concepts that are being taught to teachers for them to be able to support the teachers in the implementation of what is learned. Along with learning and using the same concepts that were being taught to teachers, participation in the HMB+A group offered support to administrators that they don't often receive in their work, provided a safe space for them to reflect upon their work with peers, and supported professional confidence and efficacy. Importantly, they learned that self-care is not only for teachers and parents, but it is important for administrators and leadership, too.

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Offering professional development to ECEC leadership, teachers, and parents is not new; however, the HMB+A model of training for administrators is unique. Providing administrators with a dedicated four-session group within which they can learn attachment-based and relationship-based concepts, receive emotional support from colleagues, and learn mindfulness strategies may support their roles as leaders, strengthen relationships with staff, and promote reflection, perspective-taking, and self-care skills. Each of these dispositions

and skills are critical to ECEC leaders and underscore the relationship-based model advanced by the ECEC field.

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