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Improving Family Engagement: The Organizational Context and Its Influence on Partnering with Parents in Formal Child Care Settings

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Abstract

Family engagement is widely considered a key component of high-quality early care and education (ECE). While most efforts to improve the quality of family engagement focus on teacher training, strong evidence from health care research suggests that the organizational context is a critical determinant of the quality of client-professional relationships. The importance of the organizational context for effective programs and quality improvement in child care has been largely neglected in both research and policy. This study examined the influence of the organizational context on the quality of family partnerships in four ECE programs involved in the Strengthening Families initiative in one state and tested the theory of a "relational bureaucratic" organizational system as a determinant of high-quality family partnerships in formal child care settings. Results showed that (1) a "relational bureaucratic" organizational context was associated with high-quality family partnership practices and (2) a "conventional bureaucratic" context was associated with low-quality family partnership practices. The "relational bureaucratic" organizations shared several key characteristics, including administrators who model and support caring and responsive staff relationships within the organization and the use of specific structures and processes to promote a caring and responsive professionalism. Results point to the importance of a relationship-centered organizational system as a key ingredient for effective partnerships with families, with implications for policy and practice.

Introduction

Family engagement is widely considered a key component of high-quality early care and education (ECE), yet many studies paint a discouraging picture of parent-teacher relationships in ECE programs (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998; Burton, 1992; Horn, 2003; Zhou, 2003). Key questions for improving family partnership quality include (1) what accounts for the gap between the desire of programs to partner with families and actual practices with families?; (2) what kinds of supports do professionals need in order to effectively partner with families? ; and (3) what factors promote or impede the implementation of family support and engagement strategies?

In order to answer these key questions, it is critical to examine the organizational context of ECE programs. The importance of the organizational context for effective programs and quality improvement in child care has been largely neglected in both research and policy (Yoo, Brooks, & Patti, 2007). Most current efforts to understand and improve the quality of family engagement focus, instead, on the preparation and training of individual teachers. However, evidence from other fields, such as health services, strongly indicates that the organizational context is a critical determinant of the quality of client-professional relationships (Eaton, 2000; Gittell, 2002; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Stone et al., 2002).

This paper focuses on the organizational context of large center-based ECE programs and the extent to which bureaucratic organizational culture may act as a barrier to high-quality family partnership practices. Organizational theory and research suggest that bureaucratic organizational structures can reinforce a

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perspective on professionalism that frames caring and collaborative relationships as *unprofessional*. This study investigated how the quality of parent-teacher partnerships was influenced by the organizational context within child care programs and tested the theory of a “relational bureaucratic” organizational system (Douglass & Gittell, in press) as a determinant of high-quality family partnerships in formal child care settings. Relationship-based or family-centered professional organizational norms and structures have been found to be more conducive to high-quality caregiving practices and partnerships with clients in both health care and early intervention settings (Dunst, 2002; Eaton, 2000; Gittell, 2002; McWilliam, Tocci, & Harbin, 1998). Because little research has examined the organizational context for parent-professional relationships in the ECE context, this paper contributes a new perspective.

Family Partnership Quality and Organizational Theories of Bureaucracy

State and national standards for child care quality consistently require that ECE programs establish collaborative and supportive partnerships with families (Groark, Mehaffie, McCall, Greenberg, & Universities Children’s Policy Collaborative, 2002; Ritchie & Willer, 2005; Talan & Bloom, 2004). The importance of partnering with families has been well established (Brotherson, Summers, Bruns, & Sharp, 2008; Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Owen, Ware, & Barfoot, 2000; Xu & Gulosino, 2006). Prior research has identified the following as key dimensions of partnerships with families: shared power; the values of responsiveness, reciprocity, and positiveness; the philosophy of a family orientation; and the behaviors that reflect friendliness and sensitivity (Dunst, 2002; McWilliam et al., 1998; Noddings, 2002). Goode and Jones (2007) highlight the centrality of cultural and linguistic competence, defining family-centered practice as that which “honors the strengths, cultures, traditions, and expertise that everyone brings to the relationships” (p. 5). Respectful and reciprocal caring relationships are at the heart of child care professionals’ partnerships with families, as well as with children. This paper will use the terms “parent-teacher partnerships” and “family partnerships” interchangeably to refer to these relationships between ECE program staff and families that reflect shared power and reciprocal, responsive, and caring relations.

Organizational Context

The organizational context “mold[s] the nature, tone, and focus of the relationships and interactions between service provider and service recipient” (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006, p. 75). Hemmelgarn, Glisson, and Dukes (2001) note that, for example, most studies of family-centered health care “have focused on the characteristics of individual health care providers. The assumption of these studies is that the extent to which any component of FCC [family-centered care] is emphasized in a particular medical setting is primarily a function of the training, experience, and orientation of the individual provider” (p. 94). This same assumption is found in much of the child care quality and professional development literature. A growing body of research supports a different assumption—that the culture of the organization is the key factor determining the implementation of family-centered care.

Organizational culture refers to norms, values, assumptions, and shared meanings, and it embodies shared values about how the organization defines professionalism (Hemmelgarn et al., 2001). In her in-depth study of nursing home care in California, Eaton (2000) found that improving the quality of care required a major organizational paradigm shift that targeted the “culture” of care within the organization. Studies such as Eaton’s show that organizational factors influence the quality of client-professional relationships as well as client outcomes (Eaton, 2000; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Gittell, 2002; Stone et al., 2002). These studies indicate that in order to understand the barriers to and solutions for improving family engagement, one must examine the organizational context of early childhood programs.

Conventional Bureaucracy

Theories and research regarding bureaucratic organizations contribute important insights into the organizational context needed to improve family partnership quality in formal child care and preschool settings. Whereas child care offered in homes frequently reflects the caring and relational qualities associated with home, child care offered in centers increasingly reflects the institutionalized and bureaucratic qualities more typical of schools (Sykes, 1991).

Caring involves making a judgment about the best course of action to take in a given situation, often based on personal knowledge rather than, or in addition to, scientific knowledge such as evidence-based practices. A problem with bureaucracy arises when the structures and practices of early childhood programs interfere with family partnerships and act as a barrier to caring (Cancian, 2000; Fitz Gibbon, 2002). This occurs in two primary ways: (1) by discouraging a caring attitude and the use of feelings or individual circumstances to guide decisions and actions and (2) by positioning the professional as the expert with power over the parent or client. Family-centered caring violates the conventional bureaucratic norms of impartiality, standardized services, professional boundaries with clients, and professionally held expert knowledge (Morgaine, 1999; Osgood, 2006; Sykes, 1991; Wærness, 1996). Teachers very often believe that they must give up caring partnerships to become professional (Douglass & Gittell, in press; Morgaine, 1999). When the possibility that

the client (or parent) may have knowledge and could make a contribution is not considered, a partnership of shared knowledge and power is impossible. The “professional as expert” paradigm common to conventional bureaucratic and professional contexts reinforces this power imbalance, serving as a barrier to family engagement practices that affirm the expertise of the family and culturally based caregiving practices (Gonzalez-Mena, 2008; Goode & Jones, 2007; Moss, 2006).

Many in the field suggest that the bureaucratic organizational approach to families is the dominant form in education; it is often referred to as the “school model” (Baker & Manfredi/Petitt, 2004; Bromer & Henly, 2009; Dunst, 2002; Shivers, Howes, Wishard, & Ritchie, 2004). Bureaucracy and professionalization are particularly salient forces in ECE today because of the emphasis on accountability and standardization that exerts pressure on program administrators, as well as teachers (Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2006; Traver, 2006; Wærness, 1996). Increased formalization and regulatory demands for accountability impose an external layer of control over many early childhood education programs—for example, by mandating collection of particular data or the adoption of a specified curriculum or assessment tool. These trends can increase the bureaucratic qualities of ECE programs.

Kagan and Kauerz (2007) call this trend the “educationalization” of child care and argue that the standardization dominating ECE today is “shifting a century-old way of thinking about how young children should be educated,” from an individualized and flexible approach to a prescribed approach (p. 21). The push for accountability and evidence-based practice has influenced the evolving notions of professionalism, contributing to a heightened emphasis on scientific knowledge and standardized practices (Noordegraaf, 2007). Given the relatively minimal preservice requirements for child care staff, the most intensive training about what it means to be a professional likely occurs in the context of the workplace. Despite the rhetoric in support of family involvement, the structures and social context of child care programs can perpetuate a form of professionalism defined by impersonal relations, the absence of caring, standardized work practices, and unequal power relations. Despite the many benefits of professionalizing the ECE field, the current trend toward formalization and standardization may increase bureaucratic characteristics of early childhood programs, leading to unintended negative consequences for family-centered relational practices.

Relational Bureaucracy: A Hybrid

Despite the common negative association of bureaucracy with “red tape,” bureaucratic organizational structures at their best can be “enabling” by supporting a healthy work environment that functions efficiently and equitably and by contributing to systems of accountability that are increasingly important in today’s ECE climate (Adler & Borys, 1996). Because innovation in practice often precedes theory and research, formal ECE programs with strong family partnerships may have developed hybrid organizational systems that blend the best of formal structures and accountability with the core values of caring and collaboration that have long defined the field.

This study tests the theory of such a “relational bureaucratic” model (Douglass & Gittel, in press; Gittel & Douglass, 2011) that would incorporate two key factors thought to support partnerships and caring in the formal organizational context: (1) leaders who model a balance of *power* and expertise within the organization and (2) a climate that supports, values, and rewards caring and responsive *relationships* in the organization. Table 1 identifies the theorized characteristics of a *relational bureaucratic* organization and contrasts them with those of a *conventional bureaucratic* organization, highlighting the contrasting dynamics of *power* and *relationships*. Drawing on the conceptual work of Bloom (1991) and Glisson (2002), these contrasting characteristics are presented according to an organizational systems framework that includes people (staff and families), structures for power and relationships (policies and procedures), and processes for power and relationships, including organizational culture, or “the way things are done” in the organization (Glisson, 2007, p. 739).

Table 1
Theorized Pattern of Relational and Conventional Bureaucratic Organizations

Components of Organizational System	Key Dimensions of <i>Relational</i> Bureaucracy	Key Dimensions of <i>Conventional</i> Bureaucracy
1. People	Staff members reflect the cultures/languages of families served.	Staff members may not reflect the cultures/languages of families served.
2. Structures: power	Democratic and participatory structures.	Hierarchical staff structures.
3. Structures: relationships	Systems exist to support use of relational competencies for caring, flexible, and responsive approach to individual needs.	Rigid rules, boundaries, and policies exist to guide uniform approach.
4. Processes: power	Opportunities to share knowledge, expertise, and power.	Hierarchy of expertise, knowledge, and power.
5. Processes: relationships	Staff relationships are caring, reciprocal, and respectful. Relational competencies are recognized, valued, and developed.	Staff relationships are formal, hierarchical, and impersonal. Adherence to rules and protocol is recognized and valued.

Methods

This study compared the people, structures, and processes within four ECE programs—two with high-quality family partnership practices and two with low-quality family partnership practices—to test the following hypotheses: (1) a relational bureaucratic organizational context contributes to high-quality family partnerships, and (2) a conventional bureaucratic organizational context limits the quality of family partnerships. This study used a structured multiple case study methodology, which provided rich and contextually situated data from multiple sources that could be used to make sense of complex organizational dynamics (Yin, 2003).

The context for this study is one state's Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education (SF) initiative. Over 10,000 ECE programs in 30 states across the nation are now implementing SF, an initiative launched in 2003 by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. The foundation for SF is the development of supportive partnerships between child care providers and parents. A primary goal of SF is to assist ECE programs in promoting a set of evidence-based protective factors known to strengthen families and reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect (<http://strengtheningfamilies.net>). SF builds on the capacity of child care programs to form trusting relationships with families, provide information and support to families, serve as a gateway to outside resources, and act as an early warning system for families in crisis (Horton, 2003; Kagan, 2003; Zigler & Styfco, 2000). The selected state's SF initiative provided an ideal laboratory for this study of the organizational context for relationship-based work with families. Over 60 ECE programs in this state partnered with SF, providing the large number of programs needed for the program selection process described below. Selecting this Strengthening Families state as the context for this study also provided a group of ECE programs that all shared a stated commitment to partnering with families and thus removed the possibility that lack of commitment to family partnerships would be the explanatory factor for programs with low-quality family partnerships.

Program Selection

In order to select the four child care programs for this study, a two-step process was used. The programs were selected from over 60 programs involved in SF because they met a set of selection criteria designed to increase the validity of the study and to provide variation in the quality of family partnerships.

First, in order to compare how different organizational systems influence family partnership practices, the study required control over rival explanations for the quality of family partnerships (Yin, 2003). Factors such as overall program quality, the state regulatory context, the size and resources of the program, and the populations of families served could be plausible alternative explanations for variations in the quality of family partnerships. Therefore, all selected programs met basic standards for good quality, defined as meeting National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation or Head Start quality standards. In addition, all of the programs served children birth through age 5, were medium to large centers (having five or more classrooms), served primarily low-income families (that is, the programs had over 50% of families receiving child care subsidies), and had participated in Strengthening Families for at least two years.

Second, from the programs that met the selection criteria, an expert nomination process was used to identify those with either high or low quality in the area of family partnerships. In cooperation with the state SF leadership team, two regional experts were identified in each region of the state. These experts were all ECE professionals who coordinated local ECE quality and/or training initiatives and were familiar with local programs, SF, and the quality of family partnerships. These experts made nominations (from the subset of programs already identified based on the selection criteria above) of any programs that were either high quality or low quality in the area of family partnerships. Moderate-quality programs were excluded, because testing the hypotheses required the use of programs on either extreme of quality. Experts were provided a definition of high- and low-quality family partnerships based on the literature reviewed above. For example, programs with high-quality family partnerships were defined as those that had the following characteristics in relation to their work with parents: shared power and control, responsiveness and sensitivity to individual parents, positive attitude and respect, friendliness, and strengths-based philosophy about working with parents.

Five programs were initially identified as meeting all of the selection criteria (two with high-quality partnerships and three with low-quality partnerships, hereafter referred to as "high" and "low"). Four of these five programs agreed to participate and were selected as the study participants (one "low" program chose not to participate). Table 2 illustrates the characteristics of each program in the study.

Table 2
Characteristics of Programs, Staff Members, and Families*

Program and Staff Characteristics	Sample			
	A	B	C	D
General program characteristics				
Family partnership quality	high	high	low	low
Number of classrooms	6	11	8	10
Number of children birth-age 5	75	175	75	180
Number of full-time staff	12	33	20	24

Location of program	suburban	urban	rural	urban
% of families receiving child care subsidy	88%	90%	90%	88%
Evidence of program quality	yes	yes	yes	yes
Funding types				
Head Start	no	yes	no	yes
Child care vouchers	yes	yes	yes	yes
Universal PreK or Child Protective Services	yes	yes	yes	yes
Staff race/ethnicity (%)				
African American	25	50	0	5
Hispanic	0	45	5	0
White	75	5	95	95
Family race/ethnicity (%)				
African American	50	55	3	50
Hispanic	0	45	75	0
White	50	0	12	50
Asian	0	0	2	0
Multiracial or other	0	0	8	0

*Note: Some of the specific information in the table has been altered to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Validity Procedures

This study was approved by University of Massachusetts Boston's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. The dependent variable was the program selection variable—quality of family partnerships. The independent variable was the organizational system. The independent variable (and the focus of the data collection) comprised three key organizational components: (1) the people (staff and families), (2) organizational structures (policies and procedures), and (3) organizational processes and culture (Glisson, 2007, p. 739; Bloom, 1991). This qualitative study included three data collection components—interviews, observations, and document review—selected to capture the complexity of the real-life organizational context and to allow for triangulation of data (Brodkin, 2003; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2001). The author visited and became “immersed” in each program for a one-week data collection period in the spring of 2008 (one “high” and one “low” program) and the fall of 2008 (one “high” and one “low”).

Interviews. The author conducted semi-structured, individual interviews with a total of 60 program staff members, asking questions about organizational structures and process such as hiring, orientation, communication, decision making, conflict resolution, group meetings, supervision, training, and relationships (see the Appendix for the interview protocol). At each program, interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis in private offices or empty classrooms with the program director(s), with between 58-80% of the teaching staff, and with support staff (such as a social worker). Each interview lasted an average of 40 minutes. In several instances, the interview was conducted in a teacher's classroom during naptime while children were sleeping and no other adults were present in the room. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed, except in a few cases where the subject did not give permission for taping. In these cases, detailed written notes were taken during the interview.

Observations. Twenty hours of observation were conducted at each program. These observations provided a second source of data from which to examine organizational structures and processes (Edwards, 2001; McGee-Brown, 1995). The author developed an observation protocol focused on the program environment and staff interactions and routines. For example, the author observed teachers and program staff in their classrooms as they communicated with one another and with families. The author also observed staff interactions in common areas such as a teachers' lounge, front office, playground, or resource room.

Document Review. Program documents pertaining to organizational and management practices and policies were collected. Examples of documents included program philosophy and mission statements, parent handbooks, personnel policies, communications, and professional development records. In addition, descriptive and demographic data about the programs' staff and families were collected.

At the end of each day of data collection, approximately one hour was spent reviewing notes and writing additional notes and initial interpretations. This reflection process was used to enhance data collection on subsequent days by identifying further questions, areas to explore more deeply, and areas of saturation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003).

Analysis

Qualitative analysis procedures were conducted using ATLAS.ti software (Muhr, 2004). Data were analyzed through coding and the use of a pattern-matching technique in which theoretically derived patterns were tested against empirical observations. Pattern matching is the preferred analytic technique for case study analysis because it increases internal validity (Yin, 2003). The theoretically derived characteristics of conventional and relational bureaucratic organizations described above (Table 1) served as the pattern against which to compare

the actual characteristics of the programs in the study. If the findings match the pattern predicted in the hypotheses, then the results support the hypotheses.

The initial level of coding utilized descriptive a priori codes drawn from the categories of organizational systems identified in the pattern-matching template. Examples of descriptive codes included organizational structures such as *mission*, *performance appraisal protocol*, and *supervision*, as well as organizational processes such as *decision making*, *leadership*, and *communications*. Once data were tagged for all of these codes, a second level of interpretive coding was conducted to analyze what each aspect of the organizational system revealed in terms of the characteristics of conventional and relational bureaucracies. These codes were used to analyze the extent to which caring, responsiveness, and shared power were present in the organizational structures and processes or, alternately, to measure impersonal relations, rigidity, and hierarchical power relations. In addition, through inductive analysis techniques, empirically grounded codes emerged, as was the case with the code *paternalistic caring*. Following Miles and Huberman's (1994) method, the emergent codes were checked against the data, refined, and re-checked.

Individual cases were analyzed separately before cross-case comparisons were made. Within each program, the data from each source were compared with data from the other sources, referred to as triangulation, in order to increase validity (Stake, 1988; Yin, 2003). For example, if an interviewee reported that the program administrator provided regular reflective supervision, that evidence was then compared with data from other interviewees, program documents, and the observational data. The results reported in this study reflect the convergence of evidence for the findings (Yin, 2003).

Results

Three of the four programs matched the predicted pattern (Table 3). The two programs with high-quality partnership (A and B) matched the predicted pattern of a relational bureaucracy on all five dimensions (Table 1). Neither of these programs matched any of the conventional bureaucratic dimensions.

Results for the two programs with low-quality partnerships showed that neither matched the relational bureaucratic pattern. One of these programs, Program C, matched the predicted pattern of a conventional bureaucracy. The second "low" partnership program, Program D, matched the power dimensions of a conventional bureaucratic organization; however, the relationship dimension at this program did not match either predicted pattern. Program D represented a blend of a conventional bureaucratic power system with an informal paternalistic system of relationships rather than a partnership-oriented system of relationships. This finding is discussed further below.

Table 3
Predicted vs. Study Results*

Program	Conventional Bureaucracy	Relational Bureaucracy	Other
Program A (HIGH)		P, S	
Program B (HIGH)		P, S	
Program C (LOW)	P, S		
Program D (LOW)	P		S

*P = predicted results; S = study results.

Discussion

This study reveals (1) how relational bureaucracy creates an environment conducive to high-quality family partnership practices and (2) that conventional bureaucracy is one factor, but not the only factor, associated with low-quality family partnership practices.

Relational Bureaucracy

Programs A and B, with high-quality partnerships, matched the pattern for relational bureaucracy and shared several notable characteristics: (1) administrators who modeled caring professional relationships and shared power within the organization and (2) the use of specific structures to promote caring and shared power.

Modeling Caring Relationships and Shared Power. Administrators in Programs A and B modeled the use of respectful, democratic relations based on shared power and shared expertise, and they provided opportunities for teacher leadership. As the director at Program A explained, "A lot of staff have been here for [many] years, and I really believe they know their job better than I know their job." Administrators empowered staff to resolve their own problems, rather than solving problems for staff. For example, a situation occurred at Program A in which too many teachers requested the same day off. In determining a solution to the problem, the director involved staff in a problem-solving process that took into consideration all possible options to honor the teachers' personal commitments while still providing the classroom coverage needed. The result was that one teacher offered to take a different day off out of respect for the pressing obligation of another teacher.

Data from Programs A and B revealed that caring for staff was a central element of the organization, often through professional development supports, staff appreciation, leadership opportunities, or administrators simply “being there” for staff. For example, Program B made an explicit commitment to care for its staff, and this care was described by almost everyone interviewed. The organization provided support, encouragement, and resources to further the professional development and credentials of the staff, summed up in the words of one teacher as “the most supportive place I’ve worked.” Another teacher expressed her respect for her supervisor, calling her “inspiring,” an individual who

stands toe to toe, neck to neck, back to back with me. She pushed me to go back to school, and I finished. She supported me and made my hours flexible so I could do my 8½ hours and still go to college. She’s like that not only with me, but throughout the agency.

Program A staff also reported feeling supported and “backed up” by the agency. The director’s supervisor, in charge of supervising administrative staff at several of the agency’s programs, explained, “We have to look at our employees as families also. If we don’t have happy employees, you’re not going to have a happy environment.” The director expressed her desire for staff to “enjoy their work” and acknowledged the work of staff with personal words of appreciation, as well as periodic gifts such as flowers.

The theory of parallel process helps to explain how this modeling of relationships with staff may influence relationships between teachers and families. Parallel process refers to the way in which interactions among one set of people within an organization mirror, or parallel, the interactions among another set of people. Simply stated, positive supervisor-staff relationships set the tone for positive staff-family relationships, and vice versa (Parlakian, 2002). This theory suggests that this modeling of partnerships *within* the organization carries over into other relationships such as those with families. In contrast, Program C had hierarchical and impersonal relations between staff and administrators, and Program D was characterized by paternalistic administrator-staff relationships. Both of these situations set the tone for distant or unequal relationships between parents and teachers, which are discussed in a later section of the paper.

Specific Structures That Support Caring and Shared Power. The second notable commonality between Programs A and B was the use of specific structures and processes to develop, maintain, and reward relational competencies. In Programs A and B, staff learned how to be caring professionals. For example, directors in both programs used reflective supervision to model consideration of multiple perspectives in identifying “more than one way” to solve a problem or interpret a boundary (Parlakian, 2002). The director of Program A engaged in a dialogue with a teacher who had been buying clothing and diapers for a family. The director asked the teacher to consider more than one way to respond to this family’s needs by considering how to help a family in a way that supported the family but did not just “parent for them.” The director explained,

She just thought she was helping and being a good Christian teacher and providing what [this family] needed so [I said] let’s try to find ways that we can help her help herself instead of us doing it for her.

This example highlights the use of reflective supervision, creativity, and mutual respect to reach a flexible response, rather than relying on a rigid stated policy or a static boundary. It illustrates how the director used supervision to help the teacher appreciate a broader range of help-giving approaches such as those that may empower a parent, rather than those more paternalistic approaches that “[do] it for her.”

A relational bureaucratic organizational system may serve as a learning environment in which organizational structures and processes teach staff how to negotiate boundaries, conflict, decision making, and flexible and responsive interactions with others. In Program B, for example, rules were flexible and responsive. “We’re not a school, you know. We’re about children and families,” explained the director’s supervisor. Boundaries with families were not emphasized at this program, although staff clearly indicated that breaking confidentiality was the line that “must not be crossed” as professionals. In the words of the director,

My only boundary is confidentiality. I mean, how can we not [have fluid boundaries]? [Should] we stop at 6:00 pm? So when it’s Friday, oh, we can’t do anything? We’ll deal with your issue Monday at 6:00 am?

Communication and supervision systems supported the use of reflective processes to manage and guide this flexible approach to boundaries and policies. Freeman and Feeney (2006) have called for the “creation of a unique professionalism that honors our field’s particular way of working effectively with young children and their families” (p. 16). The relational bureaucratic programs described here appear to embody this unique professionalism.

Conventional Bureaucracy

Findings from Program C and D provide mixed results for the second hypothesis. That is, conventional bureaucracy seemed to be a barrier to high-quality partnerships, but in the case of Program D, not the only barrier.

In contrast to Programs A and B, which had somewhat racially and linguistically diverse staffs, Programs C and

D had a notable absence of staff reflective of the racial or linguistic diversity of the families served. Program C reflected a view of professionalism that involved “treating everyone the same,” indicating a color-blind approach inconsistent with the literature on culturally competent practice (Goode & Jones, 2007; Hepburn, 2004). As one teacher explained, “The rules should all be the same. And when you get into that mindset that ‘I can be different,’ that doesn’t work.”

Both C and D had hierarchical systems, in which program administrators held exclusive power. Program C was characterized by formal, distant, and at times tense relations between staff and administrators, and among staff, consistent with a conventional bureaucratic pattern. The assistant director explained, “We [the director and I] don’t always agree on how things should be, but ultimately I have to go with her decision because she’s the director.” Staff at Program C gave mixed reports about the director, but more than half described her as distant, impersonal, or intimidating. She “manages by memo,” communicating through impersonal memos rather than personal interaction. In addition, many teachers reported that they received no positive feedback about their work. A teacher explained,

We get picked on for things we don’t do, but when someone’s doing a good job, they don’t get like a pat on the back.... I think people need to be more rewarded for the things that they do good than like bashed on the things they do wrong.

One teacher summed up the sentiment of many, saying the director “has the final decision on most of our needs, wants, and problems.”

While Program D also matched the power dynamics of a conventional bureaucracy because of its hierarchical structures and processes, it differed from both of the predicted organizational patterns when it came to relationships and caring practices. Administrators cared for staff in a parental or paternalistic way, giving “love and limits” but not shared power or control. Although most teachers confirmed that they had not been able to develop partnerships with the majority of their parents, most of those who did spoke of helping parents as one helps a child—doing things for them, giving them money, and taking care of them. This pattern of relating to parents mirrors the paternalistic caring of administrators with staff. Judgments and assumptions about the African American families also emerged, such as beliefs that “these parents” did not care about or were “too busy for” their children and that the children “were lucky to get fed or bathed” after leaving the program. As one teacher explained, “It’s the low-class parents that need our education.” Program D was characterized by conventional bureaucratic power dynamics combined with paternalistic caring and a lack of cultural competence. Program D was a family-owned business. The paternalistic, informal dynamics of caring at Program D seem to resemble the “benevolent paternalism” that Jones (2006) refers to as characteristic of some family businesses, in which the leader’s role is to take care of the staff, a dynamic that may trickle down to the way staff care for clients.

Limitations

This study took an in-depth look at organizational systems in four child care programs. As such, it was not intended to serve as a representative sample of child care programs. A potential limitation was the need to rely on expert nominations for program selection. There could have been a tendency for experts to nominate programs based on overall quality, rather than parent-teacher partnerships specifically. In order to minimize this possibility, the criteria for nominations were clearly stated, two experts were consulted in each region and nominations were compared, and all programs provided evidence of good overall quality. Another potential limitation was the voluntary nature of the teacher interviews. Over half of all teachers were interviewed at each program in order to increase the likelihood that interviews would capture the full range of perspectives and to reach the point of saturation. However, it is possible that some important perspectives were not heard if those who elected not to participate in the interviews shared a different perspective from those interviewed.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

This study applied an organizational systems lens to family partnership quality. This approach reveals that the organizational context of ECE programs plays a critical role in shaping the quality of family partnerships and carries important implications for professional development and quality improvement policy and practice.

First, a relational bureaucratic organizational context may be a key ingredient in high-quality family partnership practices in formal ECE settings. Rather than focusing solely on individual teachers, quality improvement and professional development policy such as the Strengthening Families initiative should include interventions targeting relational organizational factors, such as the organizational culture and leadership (Douglass & Klerman, in press). Relational bureaucracy has the potential to preserve or enhance the accountability benefits of formal bureaucratic structures and eliminate or transform barriers to caring and shared power. The five key dimensions of relational bureaucracy tested here provide a framework that can be tested on a larger scale and developed further in order to advance understanding in the field about how to create an environment that is not only conducive to but actively promotes reciprocal and caring relations with families. Findings presented here suggest that the value on caring must be actively preserved and promoted as programs develop increasingly formal structures for accountability. The promotion of caring family partnerships in this era of

accountability requires the clear articulation of relationship-based organizational and work practices and then linking these to positive outcomes for children and families and for workers themselves by making caring consistent with professionalism (Adams & Nelson, 2009).

Program D presented an unexpected finding. If Program D matched neither organizational type, what kind of organization was it, and why was this alternate typology not identified in the literature review? Program D is a family business. While family businesses are the dominant form of business in the United States, they receive almost no attention in the management literature, and little research exists about the organizational dynamics of family businesses (Dyer, 2003). Although data on the ownership status of ECE programs is not systematically collected, an estimated one-third to two-thirds of all child care programs are for-profit organizations, many of which are small businesses owned and operated by husband-and-wife teams (Bushouse, 1999; Wallen, 2003; Whitebook & Sakai, 2004).

The hierarchical structures and informal paternalistic caring in Program D may be organizational dynamics found more often in family-owned ECE programs; further research is needed into the influence of these organizational dynamics on the quality of family engagement. Because many growing ECE programs may be in a similar position to Program D in terms of their organizational development, it is critical to better understand how to design and implement a relational bureaucratic system, avoiding the shortcomings of conventional bureaucratic organizations. Understanding the unique dynamics of family-owned child care centers is important for quality improvement efforts, given the influence of organizational factors on the quality of service delivery.

Second, rather than focusing solely on individual teachers, quality improvement and professional development policies should include interventions targeting organizational factors, such as program-level engagement and leadership development. Teachers do not practice in isolation. Rather, they work within the complex organizational system of early childhood programs. As is already acknowledged in the school reform literature (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), failure to include, and even emphasize, the organizational context in quality improvement efforts misses a critical target for intervention and potential change. The job of ECE program directors today requires complex skills for managing multiple systems of accountability, data collection, organizational change, cultural diversity, and implementation of evidence-based practices, all while preserving the ethic of care that remains at the heart of quality. Quality improvement and professional development interventions must address the gap in leadership development for program administrators, with efforts to provide leadership training on relationship-based organizational models, facilitating organizational change, and cultural competence.

Conclusion

Relational bureaucratic theory is of particular interest for child care quality because of its potential to improve systems for high-quality relationship-based work and to close the gap between the call for a family-centered approach and actual practice with families. Despite the many benefits of professionalizing the ECE field, formalization and standardization may have unintended negative consequences for family-centered relational practices. As ECE programs increasingly develop formal systems to respond to the demands for accountability, it is critical to be intentional about preserving and promoting a caring professional workplace that is a key ingredient for strong partnerships with families. A relational bureaucratic organization has the potential both to provide the structures that ensure quality and to promote a caring and responsive professionalism. Paralleling Freeman and Feeney's (2006) call for a "unique professionalism," relational bureaucracy "honors our field's particular way of working effectively with young children and their families" (p. 16).

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Appendix Interview Protocol

Director/Administrator Interview Protocol

1. Organization and Management System

- a. Hiring and orientation and performance appraisal
 - i. What do you consider the most important qualifications for a teaching position? (How do you screen for this in hiring process?)
 - ii. How do you orient new staff for their role working with families?
 - iii. Do you (and how do you) evaluate staff performance with families? Do you evaluate staff relationships with co-workers? How?

- b. Staffing structures
 - i. Which staff interact with parents, and when do these interactions typically take place?
- c. Communication and coordination
 - i. How many different people/departments typically work with a child/parent/family? Please describe the different roles/departments.
 - ii. How would you describe communication and coordination among these different roles/departments?
 - iii. Can you give me an example of how this works?
 - iv. Can you give me an example of how this doesn't work?
 - v. Does (and how does) your staff create and maintain open communication with families about their values, beliefs, and culture?
- d. Decision making/problem solving/conflict management
 - i. Can you give an example of a conflict that you have faced between a parent and staff? How did you handle it? What is your process for handling this kind of conflict?
 - ii. If a teacher has a performance problem (for example, consistently comes to work late), how do you handle that?
 - iii. How do you decide what types of supports or involvement activities to offer for parents?
- e. Group meetings (staff/team meetings)
 - i. How frequently do you meet with staff?
 - ii. How do you use your time with them? (communication, planning, problem solving, reflection on practice—ask for examples)
 - iii. Tell me about your staff meetings and/or team meetings (purpose, frequency, format, focus, who participates, how agenda is set, is there dedicated time to talk about work with parents?)
- f. Supervision/training/professional development
 - i. Describe your role and goals (or philosophy) for supervision, training, and professional development of your staff.
 - ii. What kinds of things (strategies, format) do you do in supervision meetings with staff? How do you run a typical supervision meeting?

2. *Philosophy and Mission*

- a. Parents/Families
 - i. Please describe your philosophy about working with children and families (for example, your vision and goals for your program's work with children and families)?
 - 1. What do you expect of your staff in terms of their relationships with parents? What are appropriate boundaries in those relationships, and how do you communicate this to staff?
 - ii. Please describe a relationship you have with one of the parents here that you feel good about?
 - iii. What is most challenging for you in accomplishing your goals for working with parents in this program?
- b. Staff
 - i. How would you describe your relationship with your staff?
 - 1. How do you relate to them? What is your role with them?
 - 2. How would you describe the strengths and the challenges of your current staff?
- c. What is your program known for? What is special or unique about your program?

1. Families

- a. Describe your relationships with parents.
- b. What are your program's expectations for teachers' relationships with parents? What kinds of limits or boundaries are placed on those relationships? Do these relationships extend beyond the program?
- c. When and how do you communicate with parents?
- d. Please describe a relationship you have with one of the parents here that you feel good about?
- e. How would you describe the general feeling here about parents?
- f. What are your goals for working with parents in this program?
- g. What is most challenging for you in accomplishing your goals for working with parents in this program? What helps you accomplish your goals?
- h. Do (and how do) you/your program create and maintain open communication with families about their values, beliefs, and culture?

2. Staff/Workplace

- a. Relationships with staff
 - i. How would you describe your relationship with other staff (the staff you work closely with; other staff in the building)?
 - ii. How do you work together? How do you decide who does what?
- b. Communication and coordination
 - i. How many different people/departments typically work with an individual parent/family? Please describe the different roles/departments.
 - ii. How would you describe communication and coordination among these different roles/departments?
 - iii. Can you give me an example of how this works? Can you give me an example of how this doesn't work?
 - iv. Tell me about staff meetings and/or team meetings here (purpose, frequency, format, focus, who participates, how agenda is set, is there dedicated time to talk about work with parents?)
- c. Conflict resolution and problem solving
 - i. Can you give an example of how a conflict was handled between
 1. a teacher and a parent
 2. 2 or more teachers/staff people
 - ii. When there is a problem with a parent here (for example, a parent doesn't follow the program policy about something like arrival time or payment due dates), do you have a firm policy, or is it a more flexible? Can you describe how this works/give an example?
- d. Supervision and evaluation
 - i. Describe your relationship with your supervisor (and program director if not the same person).
 - ii. What is a typical supervision meeting like (how often, what do you do, how you feel about it)?
 - iii. Is your work with parents a part of your performance appraisal, and if so, how are you evaluated for your work with parents? If not, why don't you think it is included?
 - iv. Is your ability to work with other staff a part of your performance appraisal, and if so, how? If not, why don't you think it is included?
- e. Final Question: What do you like most/least about your job?

