Vision: A Critical Characteristic of Effective Child Care Administrators

by Meg Barden

Almost everyone has a vision of child care. A former president thought it could be provided in church buildings by volunteer grandmothers. Prestigious organizations such as the Carnegie Corporation publish elaborate plans for how to deliver the service. Worthy Wage campaigners dream of respectable wages for caregivers. State agencies have guidelines, rules, and regulations concerning it. Seemingly, everyone — rich and poor, country wife and city businessman, government officials and employed parents — has dreams for child care.

Meanwhile, a patchwork of disconnected centers and family child care homes continue to operate. From Washington to Florida, each state has its own regulations varying widely from state to state. An infant in one state may be cared for by one adult in a group of ten. In another state, there must be two adults for a group of seven infants.

Director qualifications also vary. Some states require no specific course work. In Massachusetts, generally regarded as having comparatively high standards, it is possible to graduate from a two-year community college with a certificate that allows one to administer a child care center of up to 60 children.

Massachusetts requires that directors have a course in child care administration. For over 20 years I have taught this course, first for the Office for Children and, for the past 15 years, as a graduate level course at the University of Massachusetts School of Education in Amherst.

I believe that anyone responsible for 60 children during most of their week day waking hours should be mature, thoughtful, and able to do graduate level work. Furthermore, I expect that prospective child care directors need to have a vision about what children need who are away from home all day. The literature on the importance of vision for school principals is well documented. I expect this applies to child care directors as well.

In Great Britain, Sylvia West's *Educational Values for School Leadership* suggests that those who hire school heads " . . . need to think about the values, aims, and real challenges of their establishment, and the personal qualities needed to meet them. The advertisement and details must elicit vision, excitement, and energy if suitable candidates are to come forward. "

West concludes her book with the following statement: "Vision and its practical application are a matter of determined values harnessed to opportunist strategy and skill. Such impetus and drive can still exist as long as we do not lose faith that ideas and values are fundamental to both personal belief and action."

Arthur Blumberg and William Greenfield, writing in 1980 in *The Effective Principal*, report on a study of eight successful principals and conclude that three factors explain their on-the-job success — vision, initiative, and resourcefulness. Each principal was "committed to the realization of a particular educational or organizational vision."

Galinsky and Hooks, discussing child care in *The New Extended Family* (published 20 years ago), talk about vision in their final chapter. They ask: "Does a good program of necessity have a special kind of person who acts as a unifying force, pulling the program together, making it cohesive? . . . The answer to that question was an overwhelming

yes. These leaders had a dream, a vision of the kind of child care they wanted and they were persevering, willing to fight for it."

In 1992, Lyda Beardsley reported adapting a scale for child care directors that had been used to look at the effective characteristics of principals and finding that vision was one of the highest on the scale. This paper prompted me to look at my students' vision of child care. I analyzed 68 papers I had saved from 1973-1994.

Over the years, I have used different texts and have stressed different aspects of administration, but I have always assigned the same final term paper to plan a child care center with unlimited funding. Most students are, at first, bewildered by this assignment. "Why," they ask, "unlimited funds? Every one knows child care centers don't have much money." Some are resentful, and a few are willing to risk a low grade by refusing to turn in a plan based on unlimited funds. They can't accept my rationale that the most important characteristic of an effective child care director is the ability to have a vision of what children need and want when they are away from their homes five days a week. I remind them that many children today will be in child care from the time they are six months old until they enter kindergarten or first grade.

But even with my reasoning and coaxing, one student wrote:

"Having been a nursery school teacher for some 13 years, trained in the art of resourcefulness and *scrounging* to keep within an always inadequate budget, it is not within my nature to be extravagant with other people's money, even when I can fantasize about the early childhood center of my dreams."

Many students felt as she did but, instead of articulating their distrust of unlimited funding, they described the center where they had worked and made very minimal changes; they added a teacher's room or a swimming pool, but didn't increase the wages or change the indoor or outdoor space.

In each student's plan, I looked for the following:

Salaries. Until 1982, no student gave the director a salary over $20,000. Over the years, salaries grew; until by 1992, most directors' salaries were $40,000-$50,000. In 1994, the highest salary for a director, $60,000, was proposed. Lead teachers were up to $28,000. Until 1988, secretaries were budgeted at $10,000 or under; but by 1992, they ranged from $16,000-$26,000. The rise in budgeted salaries can be attributed to the requirement that students read the National Day Care Staffing Study, a general awareness of an increase in the cost of living, and, for some, knowledge of the national Worthy Wage campaign.

Size of center. Fifty-five student-plans were for centers of 60 children or less. Sixteen wanted only a one classroom center of 15-20 children. Only six plans were for more than 100 children; 140 was the largest number planned for. One expects that inexperienced directors feel cautious about taking on big centers.

Diversity. Of the 68 centers described, 9 accounted for economic diversity, 13 for racial/cultural diversity, 13 included children with special needs, and 7 included the elderly, either by participating in the Foster Grandparent Program or, in one case, housing the center in a nursing home.

Placement of center. This, although not requested in the plan, proved to be one of the most interesting items I analyzed. Four planned for centers in their own homes; eight placed them in a hospital or corporation; three were in schools; only one was in a church. Twenty of the papers planned for space in the country where there could be gardens, barns, farm animals, hills, and streams. One student purchased space on the Boston Commons. Acreage went from two to as many as 20 acres. One plan was for a suburban area with easy access to both city and rural areas. Plans, otherwise rather mundane, would wax poetic when talking about the country — "rolling meadows," "a stream with a bridge," "a small barn could have lambs, goats, chickens, a horse and a cow, and lots of hay for children to jump in."

I'm touched and delighted that young people in the '80s and '90s have this kind of vision, that they understand with unlimited funds one could buy experiences for children that include growing things, caring for animals, walking on meadows, and playing in streams. It could be that if I taught the course at the University of Massachusetts Boston campus rather than the Amherst campus (a fairly rural setting), I would not have had so many country dreams, or maybe I would have gotten more.

Unique plans. There were many unique plans. One plan, written by a student who works in a campus child care center, wanted an energy-efficient building, a "big muscle room," and a quiet room. She included a large library, tablecloths and napkins on the table at meal times, special equipment for handicapped children, a TV and VCR for videotaping children and playing tapes back to them. She went beyond material purchases and allowed "time to finish projects."

She included a part-time carpenter under personnel.

Another plan suggested a playground covered by a large tent-like canvas ". . . so it could be used when it rains." There was a plan for a special room for resting, with mobiles and paintings on the ceilings. A feminist student designated that the secretary be a male. One plan considered aesthetics: To enter the center, one went down ". . . a flower-lined walk and entered a *gathering room*." Some plans added specialists — visiting artists, playwrights, musicians, or actors in residence. Lawn keepers, gardeners, and puppeteers were suggested.

Fringe benefits were usually ample. Only one person went so far as to include "gym membership, tickets to cultural events, monetary incentives toward academic courses, retirement plans, and a blank check at the local bookstore."

The paper I received most recently was from a male student who had been working as a toddler teacher for five years. He loved the work, but was having trouble with rent and car payments because of the low child care salary. He applied for a job as a kindergarten teacher in Connecticut and got it. Child care lost a man of vision.

He wrote: "The child care complex that I describe is a place I desperately want to exist. If it did, I would apply there. If I were a child, I would attend it. If I were a parent, I would send my child there and visit often. If I were a poet, I would write a huge epic poem about it (that rhymed even). If by chance I ever win the lottery, I will create this place so that I can work there. If I don't do it, I doubt it will ever be built. Its budget is very impractical — as you will see."

Following are the highlights of his plan.

Location. *This child care center will be located in a suburban area. The grounds surrounding the center will have the following attributes: a rolling and gradual hill, an adjacent nature conservatory, a stream running through the grounds, abundant trees of various sizes and shapes, a large working garden, a big sand pit, a shallow cave, and a low mountain with a lookout.*

Why?! I chose an area next to both a city and the country to help insure the accessibility of a diversity of children's backgrounds and to allow the chance for a variety of cultural experiences (i.e., to visit a farm one week and an urban museum the next). I want a hill for sledding, rolling, and tumbling. An adjacent conservatory would allow for great field trips and nature experiences, as would a stream. A working garden could be a source of learning (the planning, gardening, and harvesting) as well as food. Trees are great for shading, climbing, and admiring. The sand pit, cave, and mountain aren't absolutely essential, but wouldn't they be fun."

The building. *This building would have large, light filled, well air circulated, and washable rooms; soundproofed and absorbing walls; and effective central air conditioning and heating. The entire building, including the classrooms, would be accessible to disabled people.*

Teacher lounge. *This space would be a combination relaxation area, resource library, and assessment writing area. This room would be stocked with audio and visual materials and equipment, a photocopier, and a fax machine. The library section would have a variety of books and magazines describing recent and innovative teaching techniques and ideas. For assessment writing, there would be computers and a laser printer. The relaxation space would include large soft couches and chairs, a fuzzy carpet, a bunch of throw pillows, and at least one large and beautiful quilt.*

Why?! I like the idea of having a staff room that supports the whole teacher, both the professional and personal side. This room would satisfy both the need to excel at teaching and also the need to rest and rejuvenate.

Conclusion. *So that's my vision. As you may have noticed, I put a large emphasis on spontaneous, free-flowing, unhindered child directed activities for children and maximum growth possibility and comfort for the teachers. That's because I believe that both children and adults learn best in these environments.*

I expect anyone who has worked in a crowded child care center will appreciate this explicit and wise child care vision.

I was pleased that many of the students included the outdoors in their child care dreams, often going beyond the conventional playground, and indicating to me they understood the importance of physical contact with nature for children. I will be disappointed if, when I next teach the course, there is no mention of farm animals, streams, trees, and rolling meadows.

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