

Directions in center director training

Insights of Paula Jorde Bloom, Yasmina Vinci, Donna Rafanello, and Chip Donohue

Exchange invited some of the leading trend watchers in the arena of director training to share their insights on the current state and future directions in this country. Here are their insights:

Where is most director training now taking place?

Jorde Bloom: I don't think there has been a major expansion of director training in higher education in terms of degree programs, but there certainly has been an expansion of professional development initiatives targeted for directors that are being

sponsored by Head Start grantee agencies, state CCR&R systems, and local funding collaboratives. For example, Austin, Texas, has an active funding collaborative that includes five or six partners (the United Way, Austin Community College, a local workforce development nonprofit, etc.). We have been working with that group and about a dozen other groups across the country that are implementing part or all of our Taking Charge of Change leadership training. Most of these places don't have the resources to develop the materials from scratch so our TCC Train-the-Trainer model is well-suited for their needs.

Vinci: For 20 years the Advanced Management Institute (AMI) at UCLA Anderson School of Management with generous support from Johnson & Johnson has been providing training for Head Start directors. More recently, innovative Starting Block training sponsored by Nike has been developing leadership and management skills in Head Start directors, staff and parents. NHSA is about to pilot very advanced leadership skill development for state and regional Head Start and early childhood leaders. The unique thing about Head Start is that many of the directors started as Head Start parents and have truly come up through the ranks, while acquiring the appropriate academic credentials. This adds unparalleled empathy and understanding of the consumer, which is hard to teach. Not surprisingly, some of our best directors started as Head Start parents or children.

Is the amount of and quality of training that is out there now, sufficient to meet the needs of all directors?

Donohue: While a strong emphasis on teacher preparation will always be part of the field, the need for specific pre-service and in-service training for directors remains a significant need. There continues to be a lack of a defined



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career path to the management and leadership positions in early childhood programs. The work of Gwen Morgan at Wheelock, Paula Jorde Bloom at the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, and the move toward director credentials in many states has raised the bar and the level of awareness; however, too many states continue to have minimal or no requirements for director qualifications.

Jorde Bloom: Not nearly. There is still a dearth of high-quality training that explores topics in-depth. There are a lot of one-shot workshops that are pretty superficial. Financial resources remain a huge obstacle.

Rafanello: Certainly not. We need to focus on directors' needs as a necessary first step to establishing and maintaining high-quality programs for children and families. Leadership is sorely lacking in the majority of early childhood education programs.

What are key trends in the training of directors?

Donohue: New initiatives like Aim4Excellence and online director credential courses in Wisconsin demonstrate the need for non-traditional delivery systems for working early childhood professionals, and the benefits of learning management and leadership in context. I see online and blended delivery systems becoming a more significant part of director training because of convenience, the ability for non-traditional adult students to better manage work, family, and education; the opportunity for 'just in time' training; and opportunities for building a community of practice for early childhood directors. Interest in social media and new mobile technologies will also play an increasing role in how directors access and use information and network with others. The field continues to struggle with a low tech/

high touch sense of itself, even while we use tools like smartphones, iPads, social media, and Skype to connect. We have a utilization gap — we have tools in our hands that we use every day but haven't integrated into our work lives, and a participation gap — we're on Facebook or Twitter for personal use but haven't seen how these tools support us professionally.

Rafanello: In this age of increased accountability for all educational institutions, the director's role has never been more important. Directors need the information and support to advocate for developmentally appropriate practices for young children. Everywhere I turn, classroom teachers are being asked to implement curriculum that does not reflect best practice and their directors explain that they are only answering to their funders. Where is the courage to stand up for what we believe in and know to be the best interests of children and families?

It is especially discouraging to hear from seasoned teachers that they are just doing what they're told, ever mindful that what they are doing is 'wrong.' One teacher I spoke with recently told me that she thought it disturbing that four year olds in ECE programs were made to carry the burden of No Child Left Behind "on their backs." And in a recent lecture to my Child Development students I spoke of the 'push-down curriculum' that has sunk to new lows; for years I bemoaned the increasingly academic curriculum I saw in kindergarten and preschool classrooms. Then I saw this move down to the toddler classrooms. Even five years ago I warned, "We'll be seeing it in infant classrooms soon." My students raised their hands to talk about flash cards and "Baby Einstein" videos for infants. And then, I sighed, "Where will this nonsense take us next?" To expectant mothers, of course. Have you heard about mothers being told by enterprising companies that they should

be reading to their children in utero in order to build brain capacity — and that they have special products to assist them with this? It's craziness! The focus has shifted away from parent-child relationships — and teacher-child relationships — and all that we know about how attachment and continuity of relationships contributes to learning. Now the focus is always and only on outcomes for children, as narrowly defined by sets of academic standards. And directors don't know where to turn for help.

Staff at all levels need support from their director in remaining true to the spirit of ECE and their individual program's mission. This takes knowledge, courage, and a support system. It takes a very savvy individual to navigate the increasingly choppy waters of early childhood programs. I think this should be a service priority. They need our help!

Looking ahead to the oft talked about 'new economy' and toward a more diverse population, what components do you think need to be added to the training of directors?

Donohue: More online and blended options; more online community opportunities; more self-paced modules that are topic specific; making sure that important content for directors is available on a variety of platforms and mobile devices; more innovative partnerships between non-credit training providers and credit-based higher education; more pathways into and through director credentials leading to bachelor's degrees; better linkages between training, degree programs, and professional development across the career.

Vinci: Management skills are important, but leadership skills are continuing to be ever so much more important. And how about training directors to speak to parents in a jargon-free language?

Jorde Bloom: Working with immigrant families, addressing state standards, implementing shared service models, and using data for program improvement.

Rafanello: The early childhood field has always comprised a diverse workforce. What we're seeing now is new program models, blended funding streams, and partnerships. These present challenges to the director in understanding how these work and what role they want to — or expected to — play.

I am especially disturbed by the recent flow of philanthropic dollars into educational institutions and the power shift this represents; now programs are being shaped by the ideas of non-educators. Programs are caught in a Catch 22; if we take the money, we have to follow their guidelines — and if we don't take their money, our program may not survive. ECE-school district partnerships also present challenges around financial support vs. philosophical and programmatic differences of opinion. These are very troubling times.

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