Teachers in Preschools and Child Care Centers: Overlooked and Undervalued

Paul Lindsay
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Caroline H. Lindsay
Epworth Preschool, Durham, North Carolina

ABSTRACT: Teachers in preschools and child care centers have been neglected in current discussions of the professional status of teachers. In spite of relatively high levels of general educational attainment, these teachers lack uniform standards of training and their salaries and fringe benefits are low. On the other hand, their attitudes toward their work exhibit a high degree of professionalism. They are committed to their work and believe in its importance. This can be characterized as professionalism without professionalization. The relationship of these factors to job satisfaction is also explored. Findings are based on a survey of 303 teachers in preschools, child care centers, and homes in a county in North Carolina.

It is generally agreed that the professional status and salaries of public school teachers are abysmally low, given the importance of education to the future of the nation. National study commissions, teacher organizations, scholars, and teachers themselves are practically unanimous in sounding this theme (see, for example, Boyer, 1983; Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Goodlad, 1984; Lortie, 1975; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). These commentaries seldom mention, however, another crucial segment of American education—preschools and child care centers, where teachers' professional status and salaries are considerably lower. The quality of American education depends partly on the quality of preschool child care, which, in turn, depends largely on the skills of those who work with children and the conditions under which they work (Ruopp, Travers, Glantz, and Coelen, 1979). The present study reports the results of a survey of child care workers from one county in North Carolina. While this sample is not necessarily representative of all child care workers in the diverse regions and communities of the United States, the working conditions and
feelings of these workers may provide some useful insights into the current state of this occupation.

Professionalism and Professionalization

While the terms *professionalism* and *professionalization* are sometimes used interchangeably, it is useful, for purposes of analysis, to distinguish between these concepts. Professionalism may be defined as a characteristic of individuals, the degree to which they exhibit certain attitudes and behavior in their work. Attributes of professionalism are belief in the importance of the work, long-term commitment to the field, and belief that one should be free to make decisions based on one’s knowledge. Professionalization, on the other hand, may refer to characteristics of an occupation as a whole. These include the degree to which an occupation provides a service valued by the society, the extent to which it is based on a body of theoretical knowledge, and the amount of autonomy society grants the occupation to define and perform its services (Ritzer, 1977).

The degree of professionalization of an occupation affects the degree of professionalism of its members. If a complex body of knowledge must be learned during an extensive training period, those who complete this training exhibit their commitment to the work and their belief in its importance. When society values the service and gives prestige to those who offer it, the practitioner’s own belief in the worth of the work is reinforced. When the occupation is granted authority to regulate its own work, the workers accept the responsibility and claim the right to make their own decisions. There are, of course, exceptions. Some members of highly professionalized occupations (e.g., medicine and law) do not always exhibit a high degree of professionalism. Generally, however, professionalization encourages professionalism.

On the other hand, professionalism does not always lead to professionalization. The members of an occupation may believe in the importance of their work, but they may be unable to convince the society to value it. They may be committed to serve on the basis of their special knowledge, but society may not trust them to do so without interference or regulation. Sociologists have pointed out various obstacles facing occupations seeking professional status (Ritzer, 1977). Sometimes the major obstacle is a more powerful professional group that wishes to keep the occupation in question in a subordinate status. Sometimes the knowledge base of an occupation is not recognized as unique or the service offered is not considered to be of high value. Occupations filled primarily by women have often