Inservice Training for Urban Day Care Centers: An Evaluation of Training Strategies

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ABSTRACT: Professional training for day care providers is being increasingly recognized as an avenue to improve the quality of child care. This article briefly describes two projects that offered training to urban day care centers. Based on the combined five years of training implemented, the relative utility of various training strategies is examined.

Professionals in the fields of child development and early childhood education agree that the most important single component of quality in the day care center is the staff. Developing the knowledge, skill and commitment of day care staff members in low income centers, however, presents special problems: While the need for training is maximal, the resources available for training are usually minimal.

Unfortunately, no federal or educational standards for employment or training of day care providers have yet been enacted. The revised Federal Interagency Day Care Requirements which mandated states to provide training for day care providers in federally-funded centers (Nelson, 1982) have not been approved for use. Few states impose significant pre-service training requirements for adults working with young children outside the school system.

While providing day care can be extremely demanding, it continues to pay minimal wages and offers little prestige. With such constraints, one might expect training to have little effect on the quality of care;
however, two nationwide studies have demonstrated just the opposite. Ruopp (1979) reported in the National Day Care Study that although training did not result in higher wages, "Caregivers with education/training relevant to young children deliver better care with somewhat superior developmental effects for children" (p. 3). Two years later, the National Day Care Home Study (Divine-Hawkins, 1981) underscored similar positive effects of training. Kaplan and Conn (1984) reported improvements in both the classroom setting and caregiver performance in eight community day care centers as a function of a concentrated caregiver training program.

There are, undeniably, basic problems involved in providing accessible, relevant, inservice training to day care center staff members. Insufficient release time, restricted funds, a lack of guidelines for training and the diverse educational needs of child care personnel have all been cited as barriers to effective training (Almy, 1981). These difficulties are exacerbated in community based programs in the city that serve lower- and working-class neighborhoods. The lack of financial resources, combined with under-trained and often inexperienced staff members, produces significant program tension.

What inservice training strategies best fit the needs of these centers and their staffs? It has been suggested that the developmental stage of a center's program should be considered when selecting an inservice training model to assure an optimal match between the strategies chosen and the center's needs (Winkelstein, Rubovits, Tucker and Borden, 1976). Few studies, however, have been conducted to compare the relative effects of various training strategies with similar groups of trainees. Most of the fourteen inservice day care training programs reviewed by Snow (1982), for example, used an advisor/consultant model and involved a combination of group sessions and on-site visits; but the effects of the different approaches could not be compared due to inconsistency of outcome reporting in the original articles.

The following article briefly describes two projects that addressed the training needs of urban, community day care centers and applies their experience to the analysis of six critical issues in the choice of training implementation strategies. In order to maximize the benefits of training efforts, we argue that three major factors should be considered: (1) the variety of training needs that exist in each center as assessed by an outside trainer or consultant; (2) the length and amount of time available for training activities, and (3) the degree of commitment to training by staff members.