

Assessing Staff Problems: Key to Effective Staff Development

by John M. Johnston

Staff represent an important responsibility and a major problem area for many prekindergarten and child care administrators (Johnston). Providing appropriate professional improvement activities and then involving staff in those activities is particularly troublesome for many directors. Some directors try to solve this dilemma by taking sole responsibility for making staff development decisions. Others set up a staff development committee comprised of staff representatives and themselves. In contrast, some directors utilize the everybody for themselves approach; and, with little direction, simply mandate that staff will engage in professional improvement activities. Other directors use the catch as catch can approach and organize their staff development program around whatever workshops, classes or speakers pop up in the community from month to month.

To be most effective staff development activities must have a clearly established goal, must be meaningful for those involved, and must be actively valued by administrators. Rather than taking advantage of whatever is available, staff development efforts must be thoughtfully planned in relation to the operation and goals of the center. We know that, like the children with whom they work, teachers are unique individuals. If staff development is to be a

meaningful process, then new ways to individualize staff development efforts must be explored.

Finally, administrators must realize that if employees are expected to take staff development activities seriously, so must the administration. Staff development is too important to expect that the often low paid, marginally trained and motivated teachers will take part in them in their spare time. Real improvement in staff development will require careful planning to insure meaningful, personalized activities for which teachers receive release time or appropriate compensation.

A Problems Based Approach

One new approach to providing meaningful, individualized staff development activities with clear objectives and goals is based on identifying the day-to-day problems which staff experience as they go about their work. After two decades of research and practice, Cruickshank maintains that if you can identify what teachers feel their problems are, you have accomplished the first step in helping them manage or solve those problems. Armed with this important understanding of how staff view their work related problems, you will be better able to design staff development activities which address these problems.

Knowledge of how staff members view their own work related problems can be a valuable asset for the staff development planner. If staff members realize that they are working toward a solution of their problems, they are more likely to buy into the staff development process. Staff motivation to be actively involved in professional development efforts will be enhanced if they have meaningful input into the planning process. If they realize that the results of staff development activities may lead to reducing or eliminating frequent or bothersome problems, they will be less likely to look upon staff development activities as an intrusion into their already crowded job responsibilities.

Inferred Problems. There are two basic approaches to identifying staff problems: inferred problems and expressed problems. In the inferred problems approach, supervisors, staff development planners or directors infer from their own perceptions, knowledge or experience what problems staff are experiencing. One basic drawback to this approach is that it assumes that administrators understand how staff members perceive and experience their unique job requirements. Perhaps more seriously, the inferred needs approach may subtly communicate to staff that administrators lack confidence in staff members' ability to know what their own problems are.

Expressed Problems. In contrast, the expressed needs approach to identifying staff problems assumes that staff members can be one reliable source of information about how they themselves view the difficulties they face in performing their assigned work responsibilities. Knowledge of how staff members view their own abilities and shortcomings is an important key to successful staff development planning. When working with children in our centers, most of us believe that we facilitate development best by starting where the child is. It is equally important to realize that when planning for staff development we must begin where the staff member is.

Identifying Staff Problems

Recent research on the problems of prekindergarten and child care teachers (Johnston) is based on the psychological definition that a problem is an expression of an unmet need or an unfulfilled goal (Cruickshank). In other words, if we want something and cannot have it, then we have a problem. Given this definition then, within each problem a staff member describes is at least one unmet need or goal – something the staff member wants. Below is an example of a problem reported by one day care teacher:

“Out of approximately 10 children in the room, when clean up time comes around, there always seem to be two or three children who don’t cooperate. On Friday, one boy wouldn’t help (and he hasn’t been cooperative lately), so he was given a time out. After that he helped; however, that isn’t always true for him. Another child didn’t help and we just talked to her one-on-one and that was sufficient. That doesn’t always work with her either. It seems as though if one child continues to play or starts to pick up and then gets sidetracked and plays, then a few other children do the same.”

From this example, most would agree that what the teacher wanted was for the children to clean up when she asked

them to. Having identified the teacher's goal that was being interfered with, we are now in a position to understand that this teacher has a problem getting children to clean up when they are asked.

During the past two years, over a thousand written problem descriptions, such as the example above, have been collected from prekindergarten and child care staff members from all over the country. Next, these diary-like descriptions were synthesized into problem statements by a jury of day care teachers, teacher/directors, and directors, all of whom were responsible for staff development planning. After synthesizing and eliminating duplicates, the remaining 102 problem statements were used to develop the “Prekindergarten Teacher Problems Checklist” (PTPC). This checklist was then used by 291 prekindergarten and child care teachers from 23 states.

Analysis of the checklist responses allowed us to determine which problems were (a) frequently occurring, (b) bothersome, (c) both frequent and bothersome, and (d) neither frequent nor bothersome (Johnston). We were also able to identify seven major problem areas which exist for prekindergarten and child care teachers. Finally, it allowed us to revise the PTPC to include only the most important teacher problems.

Seven Staff Problem Areas

1. Subordinate Staff Relations.

Prekindergarten teachers report more problems related to supervision of subordinate staff than any other problem area. Teachers report problems such as getting staff to follow through on assigned responsibilities, getting staff to be on time for their shifts, and getting staff to recognize and act on children's needs in an appropriate fashion. Teachers want to provide for communication among their staff, and report problems

getting staff to work in a cooperative fashion. Teachers want to be effective in recruiting, training, directing, evaluating, and providing feedback to their staff. They report problems finding time to adequately supervise staff, particularly when they are responsible for children.

2. Control and Nurturance of Children.

Prekindergarten teachers report control problems such as getting children to learn and follow room rules and routines, getting children to participate and pay attention during group time, getting them to clean up when asked, and getting them to share or take turns. Teachers also report difficulty understanding and knowing how to respond positively to the frequently aggressive behavior of young children.

Nurturance problems are related to the goal of helping young children resolve concerns which impair their complete and secure participation in the center's program. Teachers report nurturance problems such as involving the passive child in activities, helping new children adjust to the program, helping children deal with their fears and fantasies, and helping children become less dependent upon adults.

3. Remediation. Teachers report remediation problems such as knowing how to help the special or atypical child, helping parents of special or atypical children recognize and adjust to their child's needs, and helping parents understand and deal appropriately with their child's behavior. Teachers want to protect children and report problems knowing how to counteract a child's negative home environment, and knowing if parents are abusing or neglecting their children.

4. Relations with Supervisors. The most internally consistent problem area reported by all groups of prekindergarten teachers was relations with their

supervisors. Teachers report problems getting their supervisors to treat them fairly, to respect their professional judgment, and to include them in the decision making process for their classrooms. They also report problems getting their supervisors to give them program guidelines or job expectations, and then to give them feedback about their job performance.

5. Parent Cooperation. Teachers report problems getting parents to follow program routines and center policies and procedures such as not bringing a sick child to the center, or dropping off and picking up their children on time. Prekindergarten teachers have problems enlisting parent cooperation with toilet training efforts, and are specifically concerned about dealing with parents who, in order to meet enrollment requirements, say their child is toilet trained when the child is not. Prekindergarten teachers also report problems getting parents to follow procedures and policies with respect to enrollment, fee payment, attendance, and providing required information for files.

6. Management of Time. Teachers reported problems finding time away from children for planning, cleaning, and other non-teaching tasks. They have difficulty managing their time so they do not spend personal time doing necessary classroom or administrative chores.

7. Management of Routines. Teachers have problems being able to enlist the support of parents and directing staff to most effectively manage the many routines of a prekindergarten program. They report problems managing toileting or toilet training routines, rest or nap time, and mealtimes.

Using the Checklist

The revised Prekindergarten Teacher Problems Checklist contains 60 items, including all problems which were found to be significantly frequent, significantly bothersome, or both frequent and bother-

some. The highest ranking problems from each of the seven problem areas were also included. The attached PTPC may be duplicated and used to identify areas for staff development planning.

Have your staff rate the extent to which each statement represents a problem they experience. Using a 1 to 5 scale, write 1 if the statement is not a problem, 2 if it is a small problem, and so on up to 5 if the statement represents a serious problem. Staff may then go back and make a list of all problems they rated 5 (serious problem). Then have them make a second list of those problems rated 4 (difficult problem). These two lists form the basis for a personalized improvement program for that staff member. In individual supervisory conferences, the administrator and the staff member may cooperatively agree on resources and strategies for reducing or eliminating these problems.

The PTPC may also be used as a basis for staff development plans for the whole center. Use a blank PTPC as a master sheet and record each person's rating for each item. Next, compute the average score for each item. The items with the highest average score represent problems of importance to the staff as a whole. In all likelihood each teacher will have some problems which are not shared by others. Several teachers may share the same problem; these can form the basis for a small group staff development activity. Other problems will be shared by most staff members and will form the basis for center-wide activities.

Each of the 60 items on the check-list may be categorized in one of the seven broad problem areas. Individuals may use their lists of serious and difficult problems to determine if their problems seem to cluster in one particular area. Similarly, the ratings for the staff as a whole can be compared to these categories for further guidance in planning.

The seven problem areas can also pro-

vide a framework for organizing staff development resources. Files of useful books or articles can be organized under each heading. Similarly, speakers, workshops, and classes can be identified and organized under the appropriate category, thus facilitating future planning. Successful and promising practices employed by various staff members to reduce or eliminate their own problems can also be organized by these categories, forming an accessible idea bank and support network.

Use of the PTPC as an aid to identifying needed areas for staff development will provide staff members with a mechanism for meaningful input into the planning process. Since each problem on the PTPC, and hence the problems and problem areas identified by using the PTPC, represents teachers' perceptions of their own work-related problems, there is greater likelihood that staff will be motivated to engage in staff development efforts based on these problems. Finally, since the problems identified represent goals already held by the staff themselves, the chances that meaningful professional development will take place will be increased.

References

Cruickshank, Donald R. and Associates. *Teaching is Tough*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980.

Johnston, John M. "The Perceived Problems of Prekindergarten Teachers." Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 231525), 1983.

John M. Johnston is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Teacher Education at the University of Wisconsin -Milwaukee, 53201.

Prekindergarten Teacher Problems Checklist

Instructions: Preface each problem statement with the phrase, "I have a problem..."

- 1. Getting children to do what I ask them to do.
- 2. Controlling the noise or energy level in the room.
- 3. Understanding the reason for children's problem behavior.
- 4. Getting parents to supply accurate, up-to-date information for our files.
- 5. Getting children to share or take turns.
- 6. Providing for communication among staff.
- 7. Getting parent cooperation in solving their children's school-related problems.
- 8. Orienting new staff to all aspects of the program and their job.
- 9. Knowing how to handle children's aggressive behavior.
- 10. Getting parents to drop off or pick up their children on time.
- 11. Dealing with a child who cries or whines frequently.
- 12. Promoting effective mutual communication between home and center/preschool.
- 13. Getting staff to follow through on assigned responsibilities.
- 14. Getting parents to keep their children home when they are sick.
- 15. Getting children to clean up.
- 16. Motivating myself to be involved in outside professional activities.
- 17. Dealing with parents who say their child is toilet trained when he/she is not.
- 18. Providing adequate staff to meet all program needs.
- 19. Knowing how to help the special or atypical child.
- 20. Spending personal time doing necessary classroom tasks or administrative tasks.
- 21. Contending with interruptions while I am working.
- 22. Meeting the required staff-child ratios at all times during the day.
- 23. Getting children to learn and follow room rules and routines.
- 24. Finding time away from children for planning and preparation.
- 25. Getting children to use words and not hit others when they are angry.
- 26. Getting parents to follow policies on enrollment or fee payments.
- 27. Keeping children's attention during group time.
- 28. Getting parent cooperation with toilet training.
- 29. Getting children to sleep or rest quietly without disturbing others at nap time.
- 30. Working with an ineffective supervisor.
- 31. Getting parents to provide appropriate clothing from home.
- 32. Finding effective substitute staff.
- 33. Feeling positive toward a child who frequently misbehaves.
- 34. Getting my supervisor to respect my professional judgment.
- 35. Being able to stay home even though I am sick.
- 36. Keeping one child's problem behavior from affecting other children.
- 37. Finding workshops that are appropriate to my level of skill and knowledge.
- 38. Meeting an individual child's needs without neglecting the group.
- 39. Getting children who are toilet trained not to wet their pants.
- 40. Helping parents understand and deal appropriately with their child's behavior.
- 41. Getting staff to model appropriate behavior for children.
- 42. Getting staff to work in a cooperative fashion.
- 43. Helping parents of special or atypical children recognize and adjust to their child's needs.
- 44. Getting parents to come to scheduled events or conferences.
- 45. Getting my supervisor to give me feedback about my job performance.
- 46. Getting my supervisor to include me in the decision-making process for my classroom.
- 47. Knowing how to counteract a child's negative home environment.
- 48. Meeting the needs of the children when the room is short staffed.
- 49. Working with equipment or facilities which are in poor condition.
- 50. Getting all children to participate in group activities.
- 51. Knowing if parents are abusing or neglecting their children.
- 52. Finding time for cleaning and other non-teaching tasks.
- 53. Involving the passive child in activities.
- 54. Getting staff to recognize and act on children's needs.
- 55. Dealing with unfair criticism from my supervisor.
- 56. Meeting the needs of all children in a multi-age group.
- 57. Giving adequate attention to the special or atypical child without neglecting other children.
- 58. Getting staff to understand and deal appropriately with children's behavior.
- 59. Dressing and undressing children for cold weather outdoor play.
- 60. Understanding the public attitude that day care or preschools are just babysitting.