

Decision-Making Influence: Who Has It? Who Wants It?

by Paula Jorde Bloom

Although it was over 20 years ago, I can recall with absolute clarity the details of my first staff meeting as the director of a new child care center. I had just read several articles extolling the importance of participatory management and was determined to develop a spirit of shared decision making and collaboration in my center. I carefully orchestrated the details leading up to this meeting to ensure full participation. I invited several teachers to contribute ideas for the agenda and I reminded everyone to be on time. Ever mindful of the importance of ambiance, I carefully arranged the chairs in a circle, I put a fresh arrangement of flowers on the table, and I brought in home-baked cookies to eat. Finally, I made sure all telephone calls would be intercepted by a volunteer in the office to minimize the possibility of distractions.

During the meeting, everyone was polite and respectful but it was clear they were not invested in the discussion. It lacked spirit; it seemed flat. I thought perhaps everyone was just tired after a long day of work. I made a mental note to bring chocolate candy to our next meeting to give us an energy boost. We adjourned on time.

As I was cleaning up the room, I happened to look out the open window. There in the parking lot the *real* staff meeting was taking place. The teachers were animated in expressing their ideas about all the subjects that had been on our agenda. I scratched my head in puzzlement. Where had I gone wrong?

Such was my first lesson that collaboration and participatory management do not come easily. Among directors, I suspect my experience was not all that unique. Reading about and understanding the principles of Total Quality Management are far easier than putting them into practice.

Despite my rocky beginning, over the years I grew in my conviction that teachers do want some influence regarding the critical decisions that affect their own sense of professional fulfillment and their centers' effectiveness. More recently, I have had a chance to confirm this belief with empirical data.



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Figure 1 summarizes data from 2,161 teachers who work full-time in 421 centers in 36 states. These individuals completed the *Early Childhood Work Environment Survey* (Bloom, 1996) assessing their perceptions of ten dimensions of organizational climate, one of which was decision-making influence.

In five areas of decision-making influence, teachers report that they want more influence than they currently have. The area of greatest discrepancy is that of interviewing and hiring new staff.

When these data are collapsed into a single data set (Figure 2), we see that more than three-fourths of these full-time teachers report that they have less decision-making influence than they would like. Less than one-fifth of the teaching staff say they have “just the right amount,” and only 6% indicate that they actually have more decision-making responsibility than they would like. We can conclude quite confidently from these data that in the area of decision making, there is considerable room for expanding the empowerment of teachers.

Interestingly, if you talk to the directors of these centers, you get a very different story. Directors genuinely believe they provide ample opportunity for staff to be involved in the critical issues affecting their professional well-being. If this is the case, how can it be that teachers’ reports are so contrary?

In probing deeper in my discussions with teachers and directors, I believe the situation can be distilled to a very simple axiom of organizational life. *Teachers and directors often (usually) have very different perceptions of what is going*

on in the center. And these differing perceptions can get in the way of achieving genuine collaboration at all levels.

Different Roles, Different Perceptions

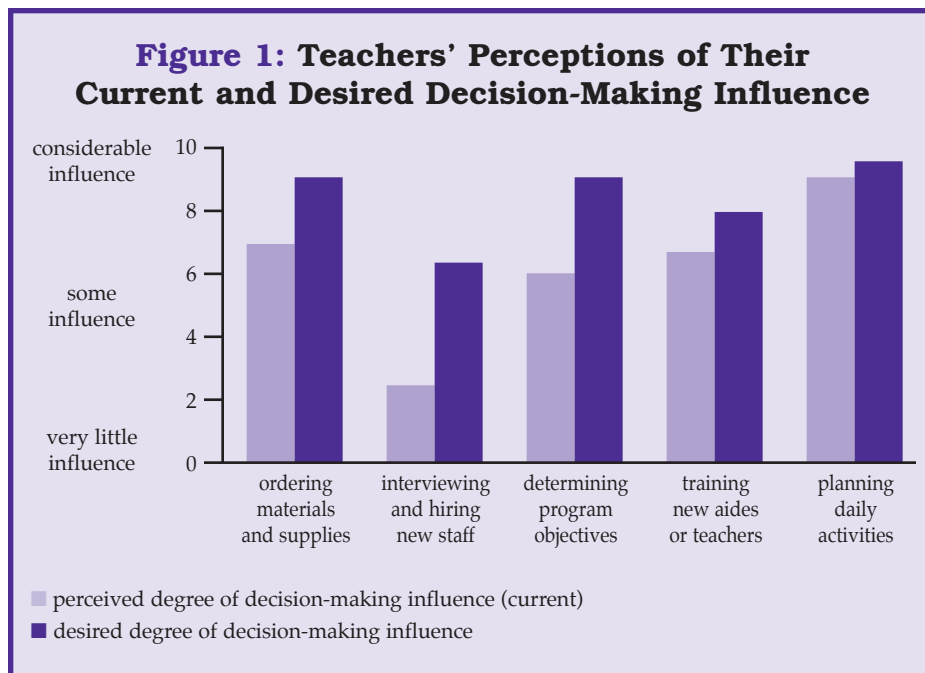
Any individual who has worked up the ranks from classroom assistant to teacher to director should not be surprised to learn that individuals who hold different positions in a center tend to view the organizational practices of their program differently. In most centers, those in managerial or administrative positions tend to view their programs more positively than their teachers. Although teachers and directors generally agree on which problems are serious, they differ considerably in their perceptions of the magnitude of those problems.

One might have assumed that in early childhood work environments this would not be the case. Early childhood is unlike business and industry or even educational settings at the elementary or secondary level where a strict hierarchical

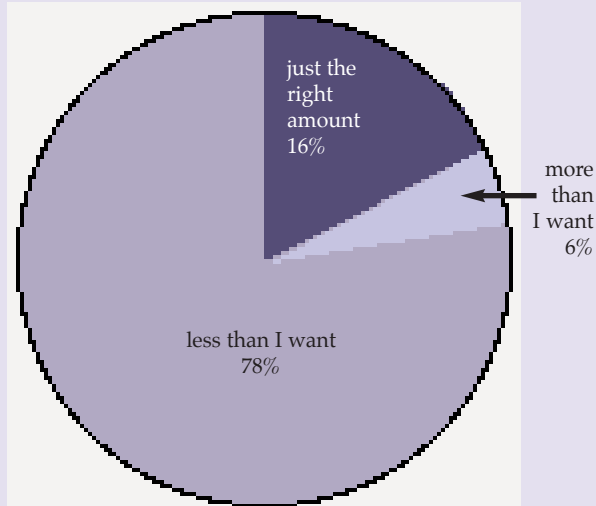
model of management prevails and the delineation of titles, roles, and corresponding job duties is highly differentiated. In contrast, early childhood educators have long prided themselves in creating educational settings that are more egalitarian and participatory in nature — where shared space, shared responsibilities, and frequent interaction between teachers and administrators is the rule of thumb.

For example, in many early childhood settings, program directors report that they wear many hats, managing the “business” aspects of the program, but also spending considerable time working directly with children alongside their teachers. Classroom aides, teachers, and directors often engage in the same duties, despite differences in their job titles. Given these overlapping domains of responsibility, it might be expected that teachers and directors would share similar perceptions of organizational practices.

Apparently this is not the case. My research over the last decade has provided compelling evidence that teachers and



**Figure 2:
Teachers' Perceptions of Their
Overall Decision-Making Influence**



If we look at the background characteristics of administrators and teachers in early childhood programs, for example, we find significant differences in age, education, experience, salary, and professional orientation. These differences may help explain why administrators and teachers perceive the “same” environment differently. Rogers (1995) uses the term *heterophily* to describe the existence of differences between groups of individuals. He points out that as groups become more *homophilious*, communication and understanding between them increases.

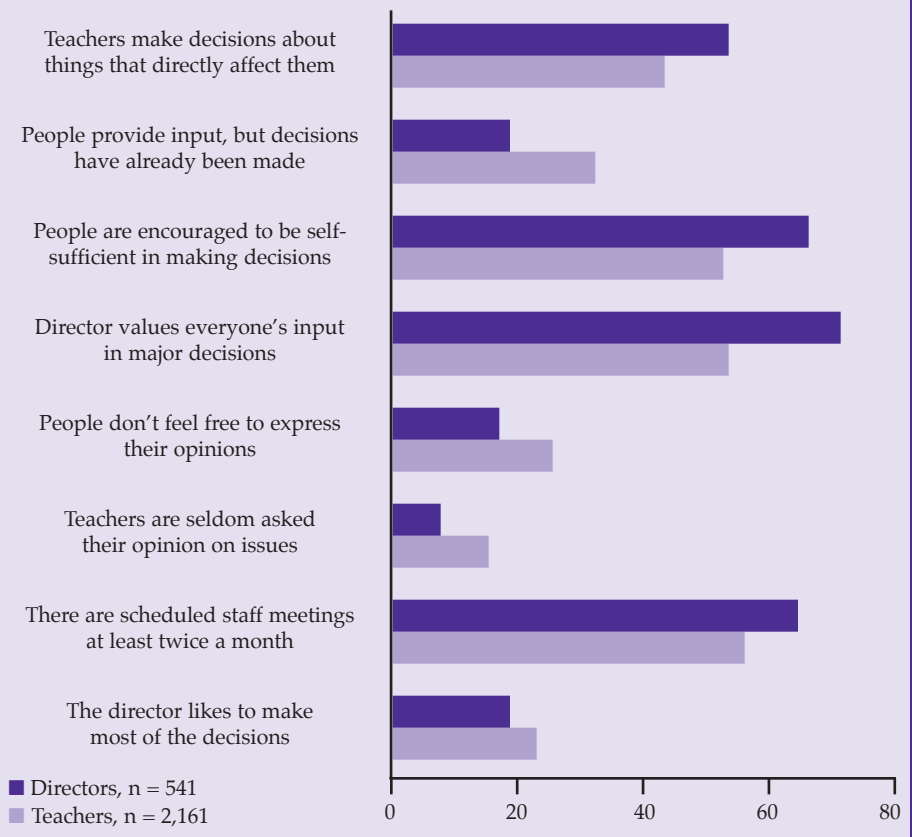
The scope and nature of the administrative and teaching roles directly relates to the way time is allocated. The assumption that teachers and directors in child care centers are in close contact and share similar experiences by their overlapping roles may be a flawed one. While the research in this area is limited, at least one study supports this conclusion. In his analysis of 35 child care centers in New England, Neugebauer found that 83% of the directors spent no time working directly

administrators in early childhood settings do hold strong differences in perceptions about a wide range of organizational practices. The area of decision-making influence is typical of this pattern.

A comparison of directors' and teachers' responses to individual items on the decision-making subscale of the *Early Childhood Work Environment Survey* provides some insight into how individuals in different roles view the world. Figure 3 summarizes these data. (The category of “teachers” in this graph includes both teachers and assistant teachers.) It is clear from the data summarized in this graph that directors consistently have a rosier picture of organizational practices than do their teachers.

Why is this so? Probably several complex and interrelated factors are at work, including differences in the backgrounds of the two groups, the scope and nature of the roles of each, and the perceived control directors and teachers have over their jobs.

Figure 3: A Comparison of Directors' and Teachers' Responses to Items on the ECWES Decision-Making Subscale



with children on a regular basis. Forty-three percent of the teachers in these centers felt that the director was not in "close touch" with what was happening in the classroom. Perhaps the roles of director and teacher are more distinct than was previously assumed.

Clearly, role differentiation is closely tied to perceived control. It is possible that this is why administrators as a group perceive organizational climate more favorably than their staff. Whitebook and her associates (1982) found that teachers often have little power or control in making decisions affecting center life. On paper the decision-making structure of a program may look quite egalitarian; in reality, however, teachers perceive a strong hierarchical arrangement.

This observation is also supported by Neugebauer's research. He found that teachers consistently rated decision making more authoritarian than did directors. One half of the teachers in the large centers he surveyed and 42% of those in small centers indicated major decisions were made by directors without consultation with teachers.

Closing the Gap

What does this mean for directors interested in implementing a model of participatory management in their centers? Foremost, it suggests that administrators and teachers cannot assume that their view of center life is necessarily a shared one. Whether differences in perception arise from differences in background, the structure of roles and responsibilities, or the perceived control associated with those roles, it is clear that individuals do "filter" their perceptions of organizational practices depending on their position in the center.

The way that people filter events may be more important than objective reality. Individuals act toward events and objects on the basis of the meaning these things have for them. Halpin and Croft (1963) expressed this idea clearly when they wrote, "How a leader really behaves is less important than how members of his group perceive he behaves; it is their perception of his behavior that will determine the behavior of the group members, and will hence define the organizational climate" (pp. 9-10).

Because a mismatch between directors' and teachers' perceptions can have a detrimental effect on the quality of work life for staff, identifying where perceptions differ is an important first step in beginning to structure opportunities to promote convergence in viewpoints.

Directors can develop their own questionnaire for this purpose or use a published questionnaire designed to assess current and desired levels of decision-making influence (Bloom, Sheerer, and Britz, 1991). Elucidating those areas where staff would like greater influence in decision making can serve as a springboard for restructuring program operations to be more inclusive.

An Update

I believe I've come a long way in my understanding of the dynamics of organizational life since that first staff meeting. While I no longer direct a center, I work closely with directors across the country who struggle with these issues on a daily basis. I am convinced more than ever that participatory management is essential for high quality program functioning. I am also convinced that it is a very complicated and sometimes messy process to imple-

ment.

Participatory management does not magically come about as I so naively thought 20 years ago by just arranging chairs in a circle and providing home-baked cookies. The trust that undergirds a philosophy of shared decision making must be nurtured over time. It takes patience, persistence, and above all, a genuine willingness to consider differing points of view as both real and legitimate.

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