Child Care Directors’ Perspectives on Accreditation in South Korea: Challenged Professionalism

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Abstract

This study aimed at illuminating 6 Directors’ perceptions of and experiences with child care center accreditation in South Korea, through in-depth interviews. Weighing costs and benefits of accreditation, we paid particular attention to the morale and professionalism of child care practitioners. Three issues emerged: a) is child care accreditation for compliance monitoring or quality understanding/improvement?, b) are accreditation criteria standard-setting for the field or suppressing good practices?, and c) is the disclosure of accreditation results functioning for public right or disconcerting and demoralizing practitioners? The findings indicated that high-stakes accreditation, just as high-stakes testing, could homogenize practice and constrain practitioners, although sometimes needed. We warn that as reviews amplify and accreditation standards move higher, administrators and practitioners could become too stressed out and distracted from what they do best.

Key words: Accreditation, Program Evaluation, Child Care Centers, Professionalism

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Introduction

Accreditation proliferates in every layer of contemporary schooling system, from child care centers to preservice teacher education programs. As the oldest approach to formal program evaluation, it uses both formal and informal data gathering, with the institution or program studied by an authority to gain respected status. Through recognition of quality, the individual school or collection of schools is identified as to merit and need for remediation. This expertise-oriented formal review of institutional or programmatic quality has received renewed attention from academics, government, and the public, reflecting the milieu of “audit culture” (Stronach, Halsall, & Hustler, 2002) and the deeply-seated questioning of professional practitioners in the era of accountability.

We observe that the process of educational accreditation, as we know it, has greatly changed over the last thirty years. School accreditation in the U.S. traditionally relied on independent regional associations, rooted in the citizen’s preference for “small government” (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2012). The regional control belonged to local member institutions. Over time, authority has shifted from local control to centralized, with reduced reliance on the values of practitioners. A dependence on formal expression of standards and indicators of responsibility has developed, with implication that teachers work less effectively without standardized frameworks of content and pedagogy. Accreditation operates today with an assumption that current practices need change toward better management, more than protection against deterioration (Stake & Lee, 2014). It delivers a powerful message that there is a set of “best practices” that can and should be universally adopted and practiced by all. It implies that teachers work less effectively without robust and standardized frameworks for teaching practices, and that current practices need change.

Some of the positive features of accreditation are that, within a limited range, it signals strength and shortcoming; that it provides the institution with leverage in seeking resources; that it helps institutionalize ongoing change in curriculum and pedagogy; and that it re-informs the faculty, the staff and stakeholders of institutional values. Negative features of accreditation are that its standards are rationalistically set by outsiders, that its measurements are only partially relevant and without diagnostic power, that it lacks mechanisms for keeping reforms alive, and that it lacks ownership and respect locally. Scriven (1991) listed several problematic limitations, including the use of amateur site-visitors and the brevity of the site-visits, an inability to trust the institution’s own-stated goals, a corporate-shared bias, and a tendency to reject unconventional innovations. Many teachers believe that they are better judges of the needs and readinesses of students, and that standardized protocols keep them from the best use of their