BUILDING BLOCKS OF PARENT DECISION MAKING

By Barbara A. Schram

Picture a group of preschoolers having their midmorning snack. At first glance this seems like one of the many mundane routines in the typical day of the typical day care center from Topeka, Kansas, to the Peoples Republic of China. But despite its benign image, the youngsters are, in reality, digesting social and political concepts right along with their juice and crackers. The books they look at, songs they sing, the games they play in the housekeeping and block corner —all are teaching them how to think, feel, and behave so that they will "fit in."

This seems obvious when we read about child care in China, the Soviet Union, or Cuba, but American child-care professionals rarely acknowledge this when planning or evaluating programs in this country. They seem to assume naively that American education, on all levels, is above the sordid mess of politics, deriving its operating principles from Dewey, Piaget, or Montessori. Other countries indoctrinate; we do only what's objectively best for the child!

Many of the manuals about how to operate a day care program, nursery, or play group fall into this simplistic trap. They describe how to find a site, how to renovate and equip it; they offer sound advice on daily routines and curriculum, but omit any thoughtful discussion about the social or political implications of each key policy decision. They ignore the hidden curriculum. They offer sample lists of books and records without alerting us to screen them for sexist or racist content. More importantly, they talk little about the need for parents to try to visualize the kind of society that they dream of and then think through what a child will need to live in or work for that kind of society 20 years from now.

If they recognized the potential function of the preschool classroom in our own society as a place of orientation and social change, they might also stress the need for strong parent participation in decision making. For if the children are receiving powerful messages, parents must make sure that the messages are their own—not those of a toy manufacturer, book publisher, franchise operator, professional educator, or government bureaucrat. If they worry about the destruction of their child's potential through war, discrimination, and an economy that too often puts private profit over people's welfare, then their child-care center should present, in its organization and content, alternative ways of viewing people and acting on society.

Translating philosophy into concrete program strategies is never an easy task, and few of us have had much practice running a union, church, work place, or political party. There isn't much room at the top of most of these, and women, especially Third-World and poor women, have been systematically excluded. However, even if they could have got into the back rooms or boardrooms, they would have found few models of genuine participatory democracy to follow. If a child-care center sets out to involve all its members in a creative struggle to change their present and future they will have to invent their own models. That will require a tremendous investment of time, energy, frustration, and collective genius.

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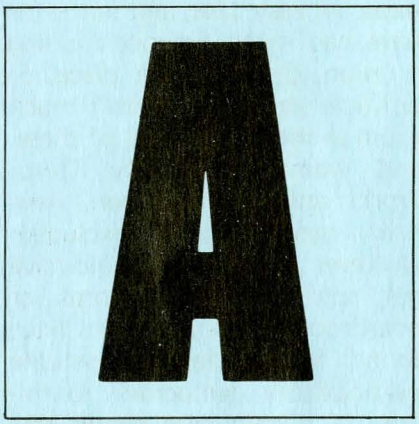
Centers already engaged in this struggle can give emotional support and technical assistance to those just starting. Last fall I studied four of New York City's community-controlled day care centers, hoping to learn from them. Each had been organized by low-income parents. Though they were receiving public subsidy, they were fighting hard to retain their rights to make the key policy decisions within their centers.

From the successes and failures of each of these centers I learned a great deal about the ingredients that go into the parent-participation process. Though none could offer surefire formulas, these were the building blocks upon which all of them were constructed.

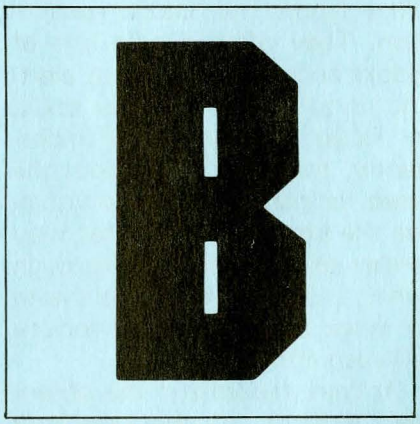


Building Block A: An Unshakable Belief in the Value of Broadly Based Participation

This belief must be strong enough to persist even when only a handful of parents show up for an important meeting, when members argue endlessly over the same points, or when a few strong people monopolize a pivotal discussion. Such a belief entails a commitment to the proposition that parents have the right to make decisions about the education of their children, and that these decisions can be at least as good as, and often better than, those made by one director sitting alone in an office.

It is built on the assumption that parents care profoundly about their children and want the best for their futures. Thus, if they don't show up to meetings or work productively when they do come, this belief leads us to re-examine the style and content of the meetings rather than the motivation and character of the nonparticipants. Perhaps the recruiting and scheduling were inadequate, or the agenda was too full or too diffused; perhaps the committee's tasks were not clearly spelled out, or an unresolved conflict among staff or parents was inhibiting the group.

The recognition that conflict, aired and worked on, can be enriching to a group, buttresses this belief in participation. So too does a sense of humor, patience, and capacity to risk.



Building Block B: Guidelines that Spell Out Formal Decision Making Procedures.

Although at first glance it may seem overly bureaucratic, precise guidelines are important for three reasons. First, nothing dooms parent decision making so effectively as vague phrases like "The director will decide, in conjunction with the parents. . . " or "In consultation with the parents" or "Jointly with the parents." These phrases encourage the creation of rubber-stamping parental-advisory committees or fruitless emotional ventilation sessions. The guidelines must spell out in simple unequivocal language, "The director will screen candidates and present three choices, without recommendation, for selection by parent body" or "The personnel committee will recruit and interview and present their recommendations to the board for final vote," or some equally specific procedure. They must state how many votes are needed to hire and fire, or spend large sums of money, and who has the right to cast a ballot for each decision.

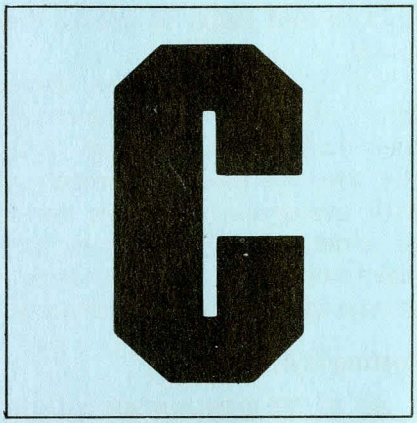
The rights and responsibilities of the staff must also be enumerated. Though parent-staff relations may be very cordial, when a dispute arises, staff members need to know such things as how much vacation time they are entitled to, how many hours they should work a week, and how they will be evaluated. Similarly, parents need to know how they can give criticism and receive feedback from the staff.

Second, if a group thrashes out how they will make policy decisions before a center opens its doors, they can identify issues that they agree on as well as potential "hot potatoes." If many policies cannot muster unanimous support, then perhaps these parents and staff should not start a center at all. Rhetorical discussions of philosophy may not uncover irreconcilable conflicts, but trying to translate theory into classroom routines certainly will.

Finally, when a child-care center received financing or in-kind support from a university, government agency, or charity, the negotiations of concrete rights is particularly important. Time and again, small groups are digested whole by agencies that insist that they abide by standardized hiring criteria, personnel practices, career ladders, holiday schedules and, ultimately, educational and political biases. The recent struggles of the community-controlled centers in New York with that city's Agency for Child Development bear witness to this bureau-

cratic cannibalism.

Parents are not likely to give up an evening for a center meeting if they suspect that all the key decisions have already been made. Though paper rights are not ironclad guarantees, coupled with an unshakable commitment to parent decision making, they do give minimal assurance the parents can make their voices heard.



Building Block C:
Decision Making Structures that Fit the Parent's Life Styles and Experiences.

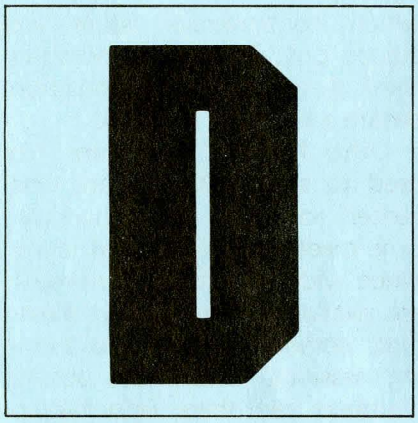
Since our society offers few alternative models for decision making, creating a participatory structure is a challenge to a group's ingenuity. Between slavish reliance on Robert's Rules of Order and the free-flowing, often covertly manipulative, processes of some counter-culture groups lies a wide array of possible structures. The most successful groups use many forms through which members can express themselves. They hold meetings at their center or at members' homes, have brief sessions when parents bring in or pick up their youngster, and conduct phone or postcard polls of the opinions and votes of absent members. Some decisions are delegated to committees; more critical ones are saved for the entire membership. Some centers create several layers of decision making groups: classroom parents; ad hoc groups of parents, staff, and friends convened for special events or projects; and a center-wide board made up of representatives from each smaller unit.

The decisions delegated to each group are not "more" or "less" important ones, as they would be in a traditional pyramid structure, but simply different ones. The decisions each group makes are those closest to the skills and self-interest of members. The classroom parents group, for example, evaluates — ultimately it hires and dismisses — the classroom staff because they are in the best position to judge their children's reactions and have the most immediate self-interest in assuring a good class atmosphere.

A parent new to the center finds this an easy point of entry into decision making. Evaluating caregivers' performances can be a whole orientation to a preschool program. More experienced parents or those with more time and energy join the center-wide board, which makes policy about funding, licensing, repairs, and the evaluation of nonclassroom staff. Similarly, classroom purchases are cleared through the class parents, school-wide expenses through the board. Ad hoc committees can come into existence and fade away after short periods of time, letting parents with special expertise or tight schedules help out in specific ways. Obviously, there must be a real effort to find out just what parents can or might be able to do for the center.

Decision making groups are restructured when activities, enrollment or external demands change. Town meetings work well with a small number of families. As the size of the membership grows, committees and representative structures are more productive. All the centers that I visited in New York City were aware that rigidity would set in if the "old timers" became locked into patterns. Often these patterns lock out new parents, new ideas, and new developments in the child-care movement. Whatever structures they redesigned, however, had to be discussed fully, committed to paper, and distributed to every parent and staff member. Members need to be reassured that change and experimentation are healthy, dynamic processes, not necessarily signs of the instability of collective decision making.

No structure was any stronger than the concrete supports it was given. Thus the centers spent a lot of time making sure parents could get to meetings. They formed car pools, provided child care during meetings, repeated a critical meeting two or three times, and held to strict time limits.



Building Block D:
Facts and Knowledge Needed to Make Sound Decisions.

In traditionally organized programs professional staff often monopolize the basic information needed to make policy decisions. Unfortunately this also happens in centers committed to collective decision making. Because of differences in social status, formal training, or amount of daily contact with the center, staff workers and active parents can often intimidate newer or less involved parents. If, from lack of knowledge or self-confidence, new members back off (or never get involved), a smaller and smaller group ends up making more and more decisions. It's not unusual to find a center that calls itself "parent controlled" in which the majori-

ty of members don't know what the director is paid, the storefront rents for, or exactly how staff members are hired or discharged.

Finding ways to transfer their knowledge takes up a lot of the energy of the participatory centers. They fill bulletin boards with meeting notices and minutes, clippings and important documents. Letters from landlords and city agencies, reports on new books and conferences are prominently displayed where parents wait for children or relax over coffee. Frequent, easy-to-read (bilingual if necessary) news-letters supplement bulletin boards and reach those who don't get to the center. Often newsletters feature articles in which controversial issues are argued out. This helps members think through their own position before a key vote is taken.

Other forms of media are also used to share information. One center routinely tapes its daytime meetings with city officials. When video or film equipment are available, they record meetings, demonstrations, and training sessions. This way, absent members can share information and emotions. They are also valuable mirrors in which members can critically evaluate how they functioned.

The hardest part of spreading information is helping members visualize all the alternative courses of action they might take. Giving only a "yes" or "no" choice is often no real choice at all. For example, before a major piece of play equipment is purchased, or a playground renovated, people need to know the possible items their money can buy. Some centers visit a variety of programs to see and criticize the choices other centers have made. One center requires that professionals who work with them propose several solutions for all problems. The architect who planned their new building prepared a series of sketches showing several different arrangements for each part of the center. With each sketch she explained the tradeoffs. Their accountant and lawyer made the same careful presentations. Since most members have a limited background in these fields, these sessions are often time-consuming, but the payoff is worth it.

Sharing knowledge with new members after the center has been in business for a long while is especially hard. The oldest of the centers gives a formal orientation. First they show off the scrapbook of key documents through the years, press clipings, flyers, and other memorabilia. They formally introduce new members to all staff members and parent committees; and a long-time member is assigned to each new one. Weekend or day-long retreats at which members review current problems/and chart new directions for the center are usually valuable.

Discussion leaders are recruited from other community groups and college faculties. When these people have joined in as equals, rather than as "experts," these sessions have been well received. Skill sessions run by outsiders also help members relate to other community movements that face many of the same organizational problems. Knowing they're not alone has often freed day care groups from the temptation to knuckle under and let the public agency "do its thing." They discover, for example, that running an interesting, well-paced meeting at which work gets done is a real challenge, often not met by the most sophisticated groups.

The community controlled centers in New York are trying a variety of techniques in order to improve their meetings. One center circulates its agenda in advance and tries to stick to the schedule it has assigned so members can make it to the discussions that they are most interested in. They separate the decisions that have to be made from the issues that just need be discussed, and they give out announcements in writing so time can be saved for questions and discussion. Some groups rotate leadership of different meetings; some break the meetings up into several segments run by different people. Some have found that breaking a large meeting down into smaller "buzz" groups to discuss an immediate question enables everyone to voice their opinion and helps to clarify the issues.

All of the groups use some form of criticism to improve their own work at meetings. Usually they try to end the meeting with evaluation so gripes don't go underground and so they can make immediate plans to correct at least some of the inadequacies.

Putting it All Together

All of the groups made it clear that the glue that held their parent decision making together was a concern for the whole person—the whole family. If parents didn't come, others asked after them because they valued their opinions or worried about them. Each of the groups provided services far beyond the simple provision of child care. They were sources of social life, health services, welfare assistance, loans, job and apartment notices, and general hand-holding. They were places to get angry, laugh, cry, and drink. They asked a lot of themselves and of one another, but knew that they had achieved something very special although still very far below what they had wanted.

Although many of the members had not originally thought much about how the center was run and had enrolled their child simply because they needed child care, if they had to most of them now would return to the days of poor facilities and jerrybuilt equipment if that was the price they had to pay for keeping genuine parent decision making in their child-care center. ■

published by NEW ENGLAND FREE PRESS
60 Union Sq., Somerville, Mass. 02143