Early Childhood Centers as Organizations: A Social Systems Perspective

There are many different ways of thinking about early childhood centers as organizations. Typically when directors are asked to draw a picture of their organization, they respond by illustrating some version of an organizational chart. This kind of model reflects the formal reporting relationships among positions and the formal work units that make up a center. While this is one way to think about early care and education programs, it is a very limited view. Organizational charts only address one aspect of the structure of the center and capture only a small part of what goes on.

With a limited view of how centers function as organizations, directors are apt to think of incidents that occur in the everyday life of their programs as isolated events. Such a narrow perspective can hamper their ability to respond appropriately to situations. The result is that they are more likely to deal with problems that arise in a piecemeal fashion, failing to see the interconnection between isolated problems.


In this chapter I connect the observations of these well-known theorists with my own and others’ experiences in the field to construct a model of how early childhood centers function as social systems. This perspective is important because as directors consider the serious business of improving their programs, it is critical that they look at the whole as well as the parts, viewing their center as a true ecosystem. This chapter provides the framework for that analysis.

What Is a System?
The concept of social systems is a general one that applies to groups regardless of size or purpose. You can think of a family, club, or corporation as a social system—a complex network of social relationships with its own unique culture. In simple terms, a system is a set of interrelated and interdependent parts that is differentiated from its environment. When the organization interacts with the external environment, it is an open system. Now let’s take this abstract concept and see if we can come up with some concrete examples of how systems theory can be applied to early childhood programs.

Central to a systems theory approach is the notion that the system is comprised of subsystems or components. On a very rudimentary level, for example, we could say that an early childhood center is comprised of different classrooms, or even different groups within the classroom. This
is just one way of thinking about programs as an integrated whole made up of interacting parts. It's analogous to an automobile. A car is made up of many different parts, all interacting to perform a specific function. This conceptualization, however, is still too basic; it doesn't capture the complexity of the interacting components of centers. The sections that follow describe a more detailed model of early childhood centers when viewed from a social systems perspective. This model includes several components.

Components of the System

The components of the system consist of the external environment, people, structure, processes, culture, and outcomes. Each component or subsystem of the model described here is definable and separate but also interrelated and interdependent. Table 1.1 will serve as a useful reference. It summarizes the key elements of each component. Figure 1.1 graphically represents the relationship between the components. As you read the description of each component, think of your own program and make margin notes about specific elements of your setting that seem to fit the description provided.

External Environment (the Outside World)

Early childhood centers do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, every organization exists within the context of a larger external environment that includes individuals, groups, other organizations, and even social forces, all of which have a potentially powerful impact on how the organization performs. The external environment is the source of the input and in return receives the output.

Early childhood centers, for example, exist in an environment from which they receive inputs such as money, personnel, and clients (parents and children) and for which they produce outputs related to child outcomes, parent satisfaction, and community economic development. The external environment includes governmental and regulatory bodies, competitors, and special interest groups. The external environment places demands on the center. For example, state quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) set specific expectations for different levels of program quality. Understanding the demands of the external environment is critical to organizational functioning.

The environment may also place constraints on organizational action by limiting the types of activities in which the center can engage. For example, most state licensing requirements put constraints on centers to conform to certain standards. But the environment may also provide opportunities the organization can explore. A program sponsored by a large social service agency, for example, may be able to tap other resources of the agency, such as volunteers or expertise in program management. The local resource and referral agency may offer quality enhancement grants to support center accreditation. A shared service initiative in the community may provide an opportunity to leverage resources.

In many respects the external environment creates the context for the organization. The external environment in which centers exist has certain values, desired goals, information, human resources, and financial resources. The values of the broader society and the immediate community in which the program exists also influence the center. These are two facets of the external environment that must be considered.

Centers as social systems can be viewed as open systems because they interact with their external environment. Problems often occur when directors perceive their centers as closed systems, downplaying their dependency on the broader environment. But centers are indisputably affected by the values of the community, by politics, and by history. Here are some examples of influences from the external environment.

- Sponsoring agency—for example, Head Start grantee agency, church or synagogue, public school, YMCA, United Way, or military command
- Local community—the immediate neighborhood surrounding the center; mental health and family support services in the community
### Components of the System

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ENVIRONMENT</th>
<th>PEOPLE</th>
<th>STRUCTURE</th>
<th>PROCESSES</th>
<th>CULTURE</th>
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<td>Funding structure</td>
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<td>communication style</td>
<td>Policies regarding staff recruitment and training</td>
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<td>concomitant roles</td>
<td>Arrangement of space</td>
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<td>Groups</td>
<td>Materials and equipment</td>
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|                       | Legal governing structure                     | Leadership practices                           | Shared values                                 | Organization                                  |
|                       | Size (student enrollment, total number of staff) | Decision-making and problem-solving processes | Norms                                         | reputation of the center                      |
|                       | Program type, hours, services provided        | Communication processes                        | History of the center                         | fiscal viability                              |
|                       | Funding structure                             | Planning and goal setting                      | Traditions (rituals, celebrations, and customs) | professional orientation                      |
|                       | Division of labor                             | Group meeting processes                        | Climate                                       |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Accountability and decision making            | Interpersonal relations                        | Ethics                                        |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Reporting relationships                        | Conflict management                            |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Policies regarding children                    | Supervisory and staff development processes   |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | (enrollment, group size, group composition, ratios) | Program evaluation processes                  |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Policies regarding parents’ roles and responsibilities | Performance appraisal processes               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Policies regarding staff recruitment and training | Socialization practices                       |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Performance appraisal policies                | Teaching practices                            |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Pay and promotion system                      | Child screening and assessment practices      |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Accounting, budgeting, and financial management system | Family engagement practices                  |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Written philosophy                            |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Program mission, strategic plan, marketing plan |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Written curriculum                            |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Size (square footage)                         |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Arrangement of space                          |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Materials and equipment                        |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |

|                       | Organization                                  | reputation of the center                      |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | perception of the center                      | fiscal viability                              |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | level of competence                           | internal efficiency                           |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | job satisfaction                              | professional orientation                      |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | commitment to center                          |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | professional fulfillment                      |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Staff                                         | absenteeism                                   |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | level of competence                           | turnover                                      |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | job satisfaction                              |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | commitment to center                          |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | professional fulfillment                      |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Children                                      | social competence                            |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | emotional competence                          |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | cognitive competence                          |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | overall health                                |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Parents                                       | satisfaction with center                      |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | perceived support                             |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       | Community/society                             | service provided                             |                                               |                                               |                                               |
|                       |                                                 |                                               |                                               |                                               |                                               |

### Table 1.1

Components of the System
Early Childhood Centers as Organizations: A Social Systems Perspective

Figure 1.1

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

CULTURE

PEOPLE

STRUCTURE

PROCESSES

OUTCOMES
Professional community—professional organizations, colleges, teachers’ unions, other early childhood centers

Legislative bodies and regulatory agencies whose policies impact the program—for example, the state’s Department of Education or the Department of Children and Family Services

Current economic, social, and political climate

Business community and civic organizations—support, expertise, resources

Technological environment—e-mail and Internet connectivity, social media outlets, access to computer software and hardware, resources for electronic communication.

Case study: The Children’s Corner

Martha is the director of a Head Start program in a large metropolitan area. Her program, The Children’s Corner, is one of five Head Start programs operated by a large nonprofit social service agency. The agency also operates a nursing home and recreation center for seniors. Martha’s program is located in a small church.

Martha is keenly aware of the constraints as well as the benefits of the external environment in which the program operates. On the downside, she feels she is inundated with paperwork in both meeting Head Start’s Performance Standards and the administrative demands of the social service agency that sponsors the program. She also has to accommodate the demands of the church. That means putting away all equipment and supplies on Friday afternoon so the church can use the classrooms for Sunday School.

On the positive side, Martha recognizes that she receives many benefits from the external environment. Her agency, for example, is able to get a discount on food, equipment, and supplies because it purchases products in bulk quantities for all its centers. Martha also doesn’t have to worry about trying to recruit new teachers. Finding qualified candidates for teaching positions is taken care of by the central administrative office of her agency. Since the agency also operates a nursing home and recreation center for the elderly, Martha is able to tap into this resource for a pool of volunteers to start an intergenerational program at the center.

Because the context of each early childhood center is unique, so too are the constraints posed by its external environment. Programs that are funded by the military, for example, have a very different set of issues to deal with than those confronting Martha in her Head Start program. Likewise, the effects of the external environment are quite different for programs in the tax-paying sector.

Mark and Jennifer are co-owners of a large, for-profit proprietary child care center. Their goal is to provide high-quality care at affordable rates. They believe that with cost-effective measures, they can make a profit while providing a needed service for their community.

Mark and Jennifer are fairly autonomous in their decision making, not hampered by having to get things approved by a board of directors. They also feel lucky they are not burdened by having to complete tons of paperwork for a sponsoring agency. This part of their arrangement they like. They find, however, there are other aspects of the external environment that impact them adversely. These have to do with stereotypic perceptions held by people in the local community about private, for-profit child care.

Mark and Jennifer sometimes feel they are swimming upstream against the tide of public opinion and negative press regarding poor quality care offered by some in the for-profit sector. They believe that parents enrolling children in their program are more critical of center practices and tuition rates even though their rates are competitive with nonprofit programs in the area. They even sense that their licensing representative is more demanding of their program just because it is a private, for-profit program. Changing these impressions is emotionally draining. Mark and Jennifer are dedicated to doing a good job, but they often feel unappreciated.
People (the Cast of Characters)

Organizational theorists refer to the people component of the system as the psychosocial subsystem. The psychosocial subsystem is made up of individuals (psycho) and groups of individuals (social) within the center. This component includes the values, attitudes, motivation, morale, and personal behavior of individuals who work for the center. Also included are relationships with others and interpersonal issues such as trust, openness, and the group dynamics that ultimately help or hinder the center in its effort to achieve a common goal (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1985).

The people subsystem is based on the idea that a group of individuals is more than an aggregate of persons. As people interact in a social setting, networks of social relations have important effects on behavior (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). Social systems are composed of personalities. Although people occupy roles and positions in the center, they are not simply actors devoid of unique needs. No two teachers or directors in the same situation behave exactly the same way. They have different personalities, needs, and expectations that are reflected in their behavior. Thus individuals shape their roles with their own styles of behavior.

Beer (2009) reminds us that it is important to distinguish between the can do or abilities of an individual and the will do or motivational aspects of performance. Motivation ultimately is the energizing force needed to coalesce people into action toward organizational goals. Indeed, when individuals accept jobs to work in early care and education programs, they enter into what Schein (2010) calls a psychological contract—the expectation of certain rewards in return for meeting organizational expectations. For each individual this reciprocal relationship will be slightly different because of the unique motivational characteristics and abilities of each person.

Just how do people differ? The following describes some of the characteristics that make each individual so unique. A more complete description will be offered in Chapter 5.

- Personal history—age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic group, family background
- Level of formal education, specialized training, and previous work experience
- Knowledge (e.g., child development, pedagogy, curriculum, nutrition, principles of leadership) and skill—the ability to effectively use knowledge (e.g., maintain classroom order, assess children’s development, conduct a staff meeting, serve nutritious meals)
- Interests and special talents in areas such as music, art, drama, literature, athletics
- Beliefs and values about different educational practices such as appropriate goals for children, the role of the teacher, the importance of diversity, the role of parents, and the importance of inclusion
- Dispositions (e.g., tendency to be nurturing, playful, curious, optimistic, reflective, resilient, risk-taking, or self-starting)
- Flexibility and openness to change
- Energy level and physical limitations
- Cognitive capacity—ability to process abstract concepts
- Learning style and sensory modality preference (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic)
- Psychological type and temperament
- Communication style—direct, spirited, considerate, or systematic
- Self-efficacy—sense of confidence and conviction that one can successfully achieve desired outcomes
- Needs and expectations for autonomy, structure, security, variety, neatness, control, intellectual challenge, achievement
- Adult development stage
- Career stage—survival, consolidation, renewal, maturity
- Level of commitment to the center
- Level of motivation
- Professional orientation — perceptions about work as “just a job” or as a career; the degree of involvement in career advancement opportunities
- Concomitant roles—outside commitments and obligations (e.g., works at a soup kitchen on weekends, cares for an elderly parent, or sings in the church choir)

**Case study: The Children’s Corner**

Prior to accepting the directorship at The Children’s Corner, Martha was the director of a parent cooperative preschool. In that position she was confronted daily with the realities of a very influential dominant coalition—the parents who comprised her board of directors. After three years as director, Martha decided to leave her position because on too many occasions she felt she had to compromise her professional judgment in order to appease this outspoken group of parents.

When she accepted the position at The Children’s Corner, Martha had no idea how strongly the people dynamic in her new job would similarly influence her sense of professional fulfillment. At the first scheduled staff meeting she was struck by the level of resistance and defensiveness of three members of the staff. These three teachers were clearly a dominant coalition. They considered themselves the old guard, having taught in this Head Start program for several years. Martha was determined not to be intimidated by them, but she also recognized that they were a force to be reckoned with. Whenever one of the other teachers would suggest a new idea, Mary, Bea, or Georgia would snap back with, “We tried that years ago. It didn’t work then, and there’s no reason to think it should now.”

Martha felt stymied. She knew she had to contend with this powerful threesome or she would be frustrated in her efforts to support staff in working as a unified team.

When individuals come together in a group, the group takes on a kind of collective personality that is the composite of the background characteristics, needs, values, interests, skills, talents, expectations, and dispositions of the individuals comprising the group. Typically, people seek interaction with those they like and avoid interaction with those to whom they are not attracted. Some groups are actively sought out and admired; others are not. And groups have their own personality as evidenced by their degree of cohesiveness (Bowditch, Buono, & Stewart, 2007).

Groups can also be viewed as dominant coalitions. These may be formal coalitions (e.g., by role—administrators, teachers, support staff, parents) or informal coalitions (cliques). Some coalitions have more status, power, and influence than others. The different patterns of interaction among individuals in groups, and the status structure defined by them, shape the social structure of the group (Hoy & Miskel, 2012).

**Structure (Formal and Informal Arrangements)**

The structure of an organization is similar to the frame of a house. Like the supporting beams of a building, the structure is the supporting framework that holds the center together. We can think of the structure of a center as including several elements: the legal structure and program composition; the decision-making structure (lines of authority and division of labor); the formalized policies and procedures guiding behavior (usually detailed in a center’s bylaws or parent and employee handbooks); the philosophical structure (mission and curriculum); and the actual physical arrangement of space.

“...We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us,” Winston Churchill once quipped. We could easily say the same for all the structural components of early childhood centers. The structures of an organization are like invisible forces that impact program outcomes in subtle yet profound ways. The key feature of the formal structure is that the roles, goals, and division of labor are consciously designed to guide the activities of members (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). Implicit in this formal structure is the power and status relationships of individuals working at the center.
Not every center formalizes all the following elements of structure, nor can we assume that what is written is actually how practices are carried out. We will get to this later when we talk about organizational processes. The following are common structures of early childhood programs:

**Legal structure, size, program composition**
- legal governing structure—for-profit or nonprofit; public or private
- size—total student enrollment and total administrative, teaching, and support staff
- program type (e.g., part-day or full-day), hours, services provided (e.g., infant care, preschool, school-age child care)
- funding structure—percentage of operating income generated from parent tuition and fees, government subsidies, grants, and in-kind services and donations

**Division of labor and decision-making structure**
- division of labor—job titles, roles, and assignments
- accountability and decision making—who is responsible for making what types of decisions
- reporting relationships—lines of authority, status

**Policies and procedures**
- policies regarding children—enrollment, teacher-child ratios, group size, group composition
- policies regarding parents’ roles and responsibilities
- policies regarding staff recruitment and training—requisite qualifications, hiring guidelines (e.g., affirmative action, ADA compliance)
- performance appraisal policies
- pay and promotion system—salary scale, career ladder
- accounting, budgeting, and financial management system

**Philosophical and business structure**
- written educational philosophy
- program mission, strategic plan, marketing plan
- written curriculum

**Physical structure**
- size—square footage of indoor and outdoor space
- arrangement of space for children and adults
- materials and equipment

No doubt in your own work you can think of numerous examples of the impact of different structural aspects of your program. The following vignette captures the relationship between the structural components of a center and program outcomes.

Connie had taught kindergarten in the public school system for 20 years. With a small inheritance from her uncle, she decided to leave the security of her job and open a preschool. In starting her new school, Connie thought a lot about the structural elements of her program. Things like establishing the legal governing structure, deciding on program composition, developing a marketing plan, and formalizing her financial management system all seemed fairly straightforward. When it came to making decisions about the supervisory and performance appraisal structure, however, or how she would go about delineating roles and responsibilities, Connie was less sure how to proceed.

She had previously worked for a district that she perceived was a bureaucratic straight-jacket. There were so many rules and regulations that she felt constricted and stifled. Connie was intent on not creating the same kind of bureaucratic climate in her new school. She also felt strongly that job descriptions, reporting relationships, supervisory and training policies,
program philosophy, and educational objectives should be developed once she had her teaching staff in place.

When Connie hired her first teachers, she was disappointed to find that they floundered with the informal structure of her program. While they were excellent teachers in the classroom, they wanted and needed more definitive guidelines about center policies and practices. They complained that the lack of formal job descriptions clearly delineating roles and responsibilities created confusion in knowing who was expected to do what, how, and when. Further, they complained that the lack of a formalized pay and promotion system bred competition between staff and intensified feelings of job insecurity.

During the first year of operating her new school, Connie experienced a 50% turnover in staff. It really hurt her to see such capable teachers leave the center. The experience convinced her she needed to take action to clarify the personnel policies and procedures of her program.

Processes (How Things Get Done)

This component of the system includes all the behaviors and interactions that occur at the individual or group level. While the structure provides the framework, processes occur when individuals interact within a given structure. The processes of a center are the cement that holds it together. The processes tell us how things actually get done. Centers often have written policies, but the way those policies are carried out is quite different than what appears in print.

The following are some of the common processes that characterize early childhood programs:

- Leadership practices—how authority and influence are exercised by those in leadership roles
- Decision-making and problem-solving processes—how decisions are actually made and problems are solved (or not solved)
- Communication processes—the ways in which verbal and written information is communicated both formally and informally; the vertical and horizontal communication networks of the center
- Planning and goal-setting processes—the ways in which a program’s educational philosophy is translated into action
- Group meeting processes—how often meetings take place, who is expected to attend, and the patterns of behavior that characterize interactions during meetings
- Interpersonal relations—the type and quality of daily interactions between individuals; the degree of cohesiveness and esprit de corps
- Conflict management—how differences in style, beliefs, and opinions are resolved
- Supervisory and staff development processes—how the day-to-day supervision of novice and experienced employees is carried out; the type and frequency of staff development
- Program evaluation processes—how the center as a whole is evaluated
- Performance appraisal processes—the formal and informal ways that administrative, teaching, and support staff are evaluated
- Socialization practices—how new staff are socialized into the life of the center; how the center shapes the behavior of personnel to make individual beliefs and values correspond with those of the center
- Teaching practices—the behaviors that characterize teacher-child interactions in the classroom
- Child screening and assessment practices—how children’s developmental progress is evaluated
- Family engagement practices—how parents and guardians are involved in the program
Case study: The Children’s Corner

One of the things that impressed Martha when she interviewed for the position of director of The Children’s Corner was the written philosophy of the program. The statement that appeared in the parents’ handbook stressed the importance of developmentally appropriate experiences, a child-centered curriculum, and a learning environment that encouraged exploration and experimentation. What Martha saw in action when she visited the program, however, was quite different.

She was distressed to see teachers distributing worksheets to 3- and 4-year-old children. She saw children waiting in line to go to the bathroom, waiting at the table to get their snack, and waiting to be called on in large-group activities that stretched their patience and attention span. When she questioned the teachers about what she saw, to her surprise they stated that they felt they were providing children with a developmentally appropriate educational experience.

Martha realized that the incongruence in what she had read as the center’s educational philosophy and what she actually saw as everyday teaching practices would provide a real challenge for her in the months ahead. She wasn’t sure how she would accomplish it, but she knew she had to begin to reduce the discrepancy between the stated philosophy of the program (structure) and the everyday teaching practices (processes) that were in place. Martha knew she had her work cut out for her.

Culture (What Makes the Center Unique)

The culture of an organization describes the basic assumptions, shared beliefs, and orientations that emerge to unite members of a group (Schein, 2010). The culture often exists outside our conscious awareness, but it shapes everything in the center. Firestone and Corbett (1988) define the culture of a school as the socially shared and transmitted knowledge of what is and what ought to be, symbolized in act and artifact. The culture, they state, “provides points of order and stability in the blooming, buzzing confusion of everyday life. It helps to clarify what is important and what is not” (p. 335). In early care and education programs, the culture of the center includes the following elements:

- Shared values—the collective beliefs about what is important (e.g., openness, trust, honesty, cooperation, teamwork)
- Norms—expectations for what is appropriate and acceptable in everyday interactions
- History of the center—key events and milestones that have shaped the center’s reputation
- Traditions—rituals, celebrations, and customs that distinguish the center from other centers
- Climate—the collective perceptions of staff about different organizational practices
- Ethics—a shared code of moral conduct guiding professional obligations and practice

The distinction between values and norms is sometimes a fuzzy one. Generally values define the ends of human behavior and social norms describe the explicit means for pursuing those ends (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). When we make a value judgment, we make a subjective estimate of quality. That estimate is based on the principles and beliefs we feel are important in life. Norms, on the other hand, are the standards or codes of expected behavior.

As people work together, implicit agreement develops about the ways in which they are expected to behave in a variety of situations. These patterns become stable over time and define what is appropriate and acceptable behavior. We use the term norms to describe these rules about behavior. Most child care centers have norms about everyday demeanor, the use of space and materials, the appropriate allocation of time and expectations for workload, professional conduct with children and parents, collegiality, communication, decision making, and change.

Jeff had never thought much before about the norms of his early childhood program until he happened to walk into the 3-year-old classroom one morning to help orient a new teacher who had just been hired. Jeff observed a series of incidents that made him reflect on
how subtle the norms of appropriate conduct are in each work setting.

The new teacher, Valerie, had worn an old pair of tattered jeans and a sweatshirt to work that morning. She had just come out of the kitchen with a coffee cup in her hand and was wandering around the classroom introducing herself to the children. “Hi Jason,” she said from across the room in a loud voice to a child who had just entered the classroom and was getting his name tag from his cubbie. At that moment Jeff was called back to the office to attend to an administrative issue.

It wasn’t until the end of the week that he had a chance to revisit Valerie’s classroom. When he walked into the classroom, he couldn’t believe he was observing the same teacher. Valerie was wearing a nice pair of pants and sweater. She was quietly making her way around the classroom assisting children with their projects. She did not have her coffee cup in hand. When a child entered the classroom, she quietly made her way over to the cubbies, knelt down, and in a soft voice greeted the child with a friendly hello.

Jeff was impressed. He talked to the lead teacher to find out if she had taken Valerie aside and instructed her about the do’s and don’ts of appropriate behavior at the center. “I didn’t need to,” she said. “Valerie just figured it out herself by watching the teachers and checking their reactions to her behavior. I guess we send a pretty clear message about what is expected at this place.”

The history of a center is also part of its culture. Centers are strongly influenced by events in the past. A center that has had allegations of child abuse levied against it or negative press for unethical or unprofessional conduct will surely feel the effect of the adverse publicity for many years. Some early childhood centers have even had to close their doors and start fresh, reorganizing with a new name in a new location.

Related to the history of a program are the traditions, ceremonies, and rituals that help define its uniqueness. Your center may host an annual May Day picnic for families, decorate a float for your town’s Fourth of July parade, or sponsor a holiday food drive for families. These traditions are often infused with deeper meaning. They provide a way for people to bond with each other and give voice to your center’s mission. As Deal and Peterson (2009) state, “Without rituals to honor traditions, mark the passage of time, graft reality and dreams onto old roots, heal our losses, and reinforce our cherished values and beliefs, our very existence would become empty, sterile, and devoid of meaning. Without ritual and ceremony, any culture will wither and die” (p. 89).

Culture is often used as a synonym for climate. The two concepts, organizational culture and organizational climate, though related, are conceptually distinct (Gruenert, 2008). Culture is the more inclusive concept, taking in values, norms, ethics, traditions, and the history of a center in addition to its climate. In the context of early care and education, we can think of organizational climate as a kind of global perception of the quality of a center. These perceptions are subjective interpretations that vary between people. This is because people perceive reality differently depending on their role in the center, their value orientation, and the context of the situation. Organizational climate is thus the collective perceptions (shared beliefs) about the people, processes, and structure. It is akin to the personality of a center.

These perceptions about organizational practices can be viewed from several dimensions: degree of collegiality; opportunities for professional growth; degree of supervisor support; clarity of communication, policies, and procedures; the center’s reward system; decision-making structure; degree of goal consensus; task orientation; the center’s physical setting; and the degree of innovativeness or creativity. While perceptions in each of these areas certainly are
related, research has shown that they are distinct enough to warrant separate dimensions (Bloom, 2010).

One of the hallmarks of a true profession is that it has a code of ethics guiding the decision making of practitioners. Individuals working in the early childhood field have a working set of assumptions that guide their behavior when confronted with moral dilemmas. The ethics that undergird their behavior may or may not conform to the stated ethics of the early childhood profession (NAEYC, 2006). An example of this discrepancy would be the director who knowingly enrolls more children in the program than are allowed by the state’s licensing code. The collective sense of ethics among teachers, support staff, and administrators working for a particular program can be said to be part of its culture. The center’s code of ethics is a powerful force shaping individual and collective behavior.

The literature on professional learning communities stresses the importance of cultivating an organizational culture that promotes curiosity and inquiry, data-based decision making, and ample opportunities for individual and group reflection (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). But a learning culture is not something that can be dictated by decree; it must be nurtured over time. As Morino (2011) reminds us, “We can’t simply create by edict the culture we desire. The best we can do is to influence culture through our words and deeds” (p. 35).

Outcomes (the Effects of the Program)
Think of outcomes as the result of three intersecting components: people, structure, and processes. Figure 1.1 (p. 8) visually captures this relationship. Outcomes can be conceptualized on several different levels: the organizational level, the group functioning or staff level, the client level (both parents and children), and the community or broader societal level.

- Organization—professional reputation of the center; fiscal viability; internal efficiency; the center’s professional orientation
- Staff—level of absenteeism and turnover; overall level of competence; job satisfaction; degree of commitment to the center; sense of personal and professional fulfillment
- Children—social, emotional, and cognitive competence; overall health
- Parents—satisfaction with the program; degree of perceived support from the center
- Community and society—quality of the service provided

The outcomes of a center are a kind of barometer of organizational effectiveness. Keep in mind, however, that organizational effectiveness is a multidimensional concept. No single criterion can capture the complex nature of organizational functioning. Some center outcomes are readily apparent and easy to measure; others, however, are more subtle and difficult to assess. Problems can arise when directors and boards lack adequate data and base decisions about outcomes (center effectiveness) on inference. The following three examples underscore the importance of using multiple sources of evidence to assess an organization’s effectiveness.

- When a center has full enrollment and long waiting lists, it might seem logical to infer that the program has a strong reputation in the community. But that inference might be incorrect. Full enrollment could also be due to the lack of other viable options for parents in the community.
- In looking at a high teacher turnover rate at a center, its board of directors might conclude that the director was not doing a good job in supervising staff or providing an enriching work environment. This may or may not be the case. A high turnover rate among teachers could be due to faulty hiring practices on the part of the board. The board could be hiring individuals who are overqualified for their positions and quickly become dissatisfied with the pay and lack of challenge in their jobs.
Parents are often quite vocal when they are dissatisfied with some aspect of an early childhood program. And parents who are pleased with the program often do not take the time to compliment the staff or provide positive written feedback. Directors who base their assessment of their program’s effectiveness only on unsolicited feedback may be getting an unrepresentative sample of parents’ true perceptions about their program’s quality.

Look again at Figure 1.1, and note that the arrows extend outward from the outcomes component back to the external environment. This completes the loop of influences. Sometimes the effects of outcomes on the external environment are strong as in the case of a higher demand for services when a program has achieved a strong reputation. Other times the effect can have far-reaching consequences. We have read, for example, how a few well-publicized cases of child abuse in child care centers resulted in legislation in several states for mandated fingerprinting of all child care workers and systematic child abuse reporting procedures. On a more positive note, we have also seen how the highly publicized program outcomes of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart, et al., 2005) have been used by child advocates to achieve increased funding for disadvantaged children.

Characteristics of Centers When Viewed as Social Systems

Now that we have looked at all of the components of the center as a social system, let’s turn our attention to some of the common characteristics of centers when viewed as systems.

Change in One Component Has an Effect on Other Components

Central to a social systems perspective is the notion that change in one component of a center will have a ripple effect throughout the social system of the center. For example, a change in the people component such as the hiring of a new director or lead teacher will most certainly alter certain processes at the center. Likewise, a change in the structure of a center (e.g., a new salary scale or change in reporting relationships) will have a strong influence in shaping the attitudes, behavior, and expectations of individuals who work in the program.

Changes in the external environment as well impact a center in different ways. State and federally funded programs, for example, are keenly aware of how the external environment affects organizational practices, particularly when there are changes in funding levels or regulatory requirements.

The awarding of Early Head Start and Child Care partnership grants and the creation of a career pathway portal for infant-toddler teachers are two examples of the impact the external environment can have on center practices. Likewise, state mandates for QRIS that expand technical assistance and foster cross-agency staff training may also impact program practices at the center level.

Organizational Equilibrium Is a Desirable Goal

Most organizational theorists believe that maintaining a sense of equilibrium is essential for the continued adequacy and viability of an organization to carry out its functions. An example will help illustrate this point. People work in early childhood education in order to satisfy certain needs—for example, the need for achievement, the need for security, the need for affiliation. The center where they work also has needs that are fulfilled by the employees who function in various roles. Getzels and Guba (1957) describe this reciprocal relationship as the interplay between the nomothetic (the organization’s needs) and the idiographic (the personal needs of the individuals who fill various roles). From this perspective, organizational equilibrium means maintaining that delicate balance between meeting the needs of the organization and those of the individual. As long
as this state of equilibrium exists, the relationship presumably will be satisfactory, enduring, and relatively productive (Owens, 2014).

**Organizations Must Change and Adapt**

Social systems theory is not a static model of how organizations function. To the contrary, early childhood centers as organizations are dynamic in nature—always in flux, adapting and changing. The axiom “quality is a moving target” reminds us that what we consider “best practice” is not immutable. New research and our own experiences shape our definition of quality. It goes without saying that to remain vital and thriving and maintain a sense of equilibrium, centers must be flexible and able to adapt to changing trends and shifting needs in the external environment. The ability to reexamine the current structure and processes of a program in light of changing trends is the key to this adaptation.

Sometimes these changes are abrupt and organizations must respond quickly. A tragic incident in a suburb of Chicago illustrates the point. A young woman went on a shooting rampage in an elementary school. Within hours of the incident, virtually every educational institution in surrounding communities had instituted stringent security procedures. This single incident in the external environment had a strong and immediate impact on early childhood centers in the area. Directors of these programs knew they had to implement swift changes in order to ensure children’s safety and allay the fears of parents and teachers. Regrettably, reoccurring events like this have necessitated changes in early childhood programs’ risk management procedures.

At other times the changes are more gradual. The increased numbers of mothers in the workforce during the last several decades has created an increased demand for infant and toddler care, prompting directors of early care and education programs to expand their menu of program options. Concurrently, the demand for parent cooperative preschools has diminished. While this program model was robust and thriving in the 1960s and 70s, today the number of parent cooperative preschools has decreased significantly.

**Organizational Health Is Related to the Congruence Between Components**

Lencioni (2012) defines a healthy organization as one where there is minimal politics and confusion, a high degree of morale and productivity, and low turnover among good employees. From a system’s perspective, organizational health can be viewed as the relative degree of congruence or fit between the different components of the system. A healthy organization not only exists in its environment, but continues to thrive over the long haul.

A healthy early childhood center is one that has norms of continuous improvement, engaging in an ongoing self-examination aimed at identifying incongruities between components. For example, one aspect of the center’s structure is the division of labor and the tasks associated with each job. The individuals assigned to do these tasks have certain characteristics (e.g., skill, knowledge, motivation, interest). When the individual’s knowledge and skill match the knowledge and skill demanded by the task, performance (an outcome) will be more effective. Likewise, when the physical environment (structure) and educational philosophy (structure) of a program support the teaching practices (processes), better outcomes in the way of staff satisfaction and fulfillment will be ensured.

From these two examples, it is possible to see how a web of connections between the people, structure, and process components directly affect outcomes. The greater the total degree of congruence or fit between the various components, the more effective an organization will be. The director’s role in assessing congruence is central. In Chapter 4 you’ll be introduced to some practical tools to assist in assessing the degree of fit between various components of your program.
A Final Word

A systems approach for describing early childhood centers can lead to a better understanding of the impact of change and a more accurate estimate of anticipated outcomes. A systems view of organizations in itself is not a planning strategy nor does it predict outcomes or results. It is merely a way of looking at centers as an integrated whole that is made up of interrelated, interacting parts. By asking what impact a particular change may have on all components of the system (external environment, people, structure, processes, culture, and outcomes), it is possible to be more aware of, and thus better prepared to manage, the potential negative aspects of change.

A social systems perspective also helps early childhood administrators understand the potential sources of conflict that are part of organizational life. Many of the problems centers experience arise from the fundamental conflict between the needs and motives of an individual and the requirements of the organization. Individuals attempt to personalize their roles so their idiosyncratic needs can be met, whereas organizations attempt to mold and fit individuals into prescribed roles in order to best achieve its goals. It is natural that there is inherent tension between these two elements in the system, and how this tension is handled impacts center outcomes. High morale, for example, results when organizational goals and expectations are compatible with the collective needs and expectations of individuals.

One important implication of a systems perspective is that successful organizational change necessitates first understanding the unique system of the organization, then identifying and diagnosing potential problems in the system (the degree of fit between components), and finally determining strategies that promote better equilibrium in the system. This approach to change implies that different configurations of key components result in different outcomes. Thus it is not a question of finding the one best way of managing change, but rather determining effective combinations of components that will lead to desired outcomes.

An organization capable of continuous renewal must have built-in provisions for self-criticism.

John Gardner