

Ochoa's Child Care: Taking on Many Responsibilities for the Betterment of Students

Funded by: Universal PreKindergarten (UPK) Mixed Delivery Planning Grant

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They can tell that I am trusting myself to them so that I can show them that I am committed to helping their child grow academically, social, emotionally and health wise - Ochoa Child Care Center Director

Overview

In Orange County, families have numerous child care and preschool options to choose from including California State Preschools, Head Start, Family Child Care centers, and more. While the variety of options allows families to choose the best setting for their child, it does also mean there can be a lot of variance from option to option. In an effort to document and better understand the practices of a high-quality child care and preschool option, an in-depth interview of a family child care center director and their staff were conducted. The following case study details best practices in regards to inclusion in early childhood, ways this center supports and builds trust with parents and families and the effort put in by all staff at the center to ensure children receive the best education they can provide.

Students Come First

All the staff at Ochoa's Child Care have the mindset that students come first. It is unsurprising that people who work in early childcare have a mindset that, "the students always come first", but this was a point that all staff within Ochoa's Child Care emphasized continuously. Staff within Ochoa not only emphasized that students always come first, but they always come first and are always accepted as they are. When describing one student who needs more support than others, staff at Ochoa said, "[We] don't do anything different. If we have a group session, she will be included, when it's time to color, everybody colors...she's treated just like everybody else." The acceptance of students as they are is the core tenant that seems to drive the work of their center and how they view and interact with all of the students at the center. Importantly, the staff at Ochoa do not see this as an extra task, responsibility or burden but instead described ways that these practices benefit all students. They described that by having a classroom that leads with acceptance, all students are able to learn from one another. This means these students are empathetic, helpful and serve as somewhat of a peer mentor, helping each other's maturation and emotional development.

But as [the students] grow together, they've learned to kind of love each other and respect each other. And I tell them, you know, just [student] needs a little bit more time. For example, like we're going to tell him, he wants to play with you, and can you give him some time to play with you, and then after that, you can go build whatever you want?

Their model of acceptance also helps to create learning environments that are dynamic, flexible, and oftentimes exciting to the students. In numerous instances, staff at Ochoa described the ways they customize, and adapt activities to the preferences and needs of

students. Staff described the ways they are constantly adapting indoor and outdoor activities, providing alternatives and intentionally setting up activities to meet the needs of students. The director of the center described the degree of nuance that goes into these adaptations and adjustments, “[The student] likes sensory activities; there was a time where she really liked sand, like beach sand, [now] she does not like that sand, she’s liking kinetic sand now”. All staff at the center expressed that although some of these adaptations may be small in scale, it makes a big difference for students. This example is a microcosm of the larger attitude the staff carry in regards to embracing student differences. The differences between students inform how they approach each student and the ways they approach them during the day. Importantly, staff also discussed differences between students that were not differences in learning. Students in the center can require extra support because they miss their parents, they need help during meal times, or they need to brush their teeth when they get to school. The staff take on the attitude that students who may need extra support are just students, and there are times when all students need extra support, regardless of their ability to learn.

The practices above are not groundbreaking, but the time, intentionality and work the practices require are intense for the staff. All staff described how often they are simply listening to the students, writing down what each student needs individually and consistently reacting to the needs of the students. On a case-by-case basis this may seem attainable, but in the larger setting of the center, doing this for all the children requires staff who always put students first. The unending dedication to their students and meeting their needs was present throughout the interview and focus group and can be seen through Ochoa’s social media posts and the ways they dedicate themselves to the work.

Utilizing Assessments Effectively

The primary avenue for the staff to engage with the larger resource and referral system is through the use of assessments such as the Desired Result Developmental Profile (DRDP) and Ages and Stages (ASQ) questionnaire. The director of the center expressed that she spends a lot of time doing assessments whether it be the DRDP or ASQ with all students in the center. Despite the amount of time it takes up for her, she has decided that conducting these assessments multiple times a year for each student provides invaluable information for both the staff at the center and for the parents about the developmental progress of their child.

Staff at the center utilize the results of the assessments, in conjunction with their notes and observations of each child to compile a comprehensive view of the child and their development. These assessments also help the staff to better scaffold and support students with their specific needs and to provide these scaffolds throughout the classroom.

What I'm doing is that I give the parents the ASQ after the students have been with me for a month, and then after that, we do a follow up every two months or six months, depending on how this the student is developing and how young the child is

These assessments are helpful for the center staff, but the greater purpose of these assessments is to assist parents to engage with the resource and referral system more effectively. These assessments assist parents in multiple ways.

1. **Providing Technical Language.** Engaging with the resource and referral system can be difficult for families as it is often filled with requirements, paperwork and highly specific and technical language. By conducting ASQ assessments, reviewing the results in a private meeting with the student's family and communicating what they should do now, it provides families clear language, understanding and a forward path. The director of the center gives clear instructions, *"I tell them to please go to their pediatrician to get an evaluation,"* and ensures families have a clear understanding of the ASQ before families meet with their pediatrician.
2. **Communicating Specific Needs.** Staff at Ochoa described how families can sometimes be hesitant to engage with the resource and referral system because it means admitting their child has a need that may require extra support. By conducting an assessment, it can provide a more narrow scope on the areas of need for each student. This is to say, an assessment can change the view of a student from, "they are a child with a disability" to "they are a child who needs speech language therapy". This has the potential to ease families as it is a specific area of need their child has and is something more actionable than the generalized idea of a disability.
3. **Advocating for Their Child.** In many conversations with families who are parents or guardians of a student with a disability, they have consistently described the need to advocate on behalf of their child. This advocacy work is to ensure that their child receives the supports they need and are in an environment where they can thrive. By conducting these assessments, it provides parents and guardians another tool to be able to do that advocacy work. By conducting an initial assessment at the center, this gives families the leverage they need to have a more formal evaluation of their child. Although this evaluation may be something that families are entitled to, focus groups with parents and guardians have described the difficulty in getting these types of evaluations completed. Parents and guardians have described how they will take any tool, resource or documentation to support their advocacy work and an ASQ assessment can act as an important tool for families who are not sure what to do or where to go to receive support.
4. **Providing a Schedule for Follow-Up.** To ensure that families are fully engaging with the system requires the director of the center to keep notes on which children should have received evaluations, by when and to follow-up with the families on what the results of the evaluation was. The director of the center described the usual process:

Tell them that your child care provider gave you the results of the ASQ, and that you have responded to all the questions, and this is the result, and that [your child care provider] is suggesting that based on the results, that your child needs an evaluation. And so when I tell them this, I give them a couple of days, and then I follow up, and I say, did you make the appointment with the pediatrician? When's your appointment with the pediatrician? And depending on when they give me the date, I register, I write it down... Then I do another follow

up after the date to see how it went, if the pediatrician recommended something or what happened, just to follow up. And so generally, that's what happens. And they tell me, oh yeah, they gave me that resource, they told me to call this place and this and that. And so I'll call and do another follow up. Did you call that place? When's your appointment for and so that's how I am, kind of monitoring them. And once they have the appointment, okay, like, did you go to the appointment? How did it go? Any paperwork that you got where they gave you some results. What did they tell you? What's next?

The director of the Ochoa Child Care center spends a lot of her time working with, talking about, and following-up on assessments. Although it takes up so much time, these are invaluable resource for the center, for parents and for students to ensure in all environments possible, children are receiving the supports they need to thrive and be successful.

Supporting Parents and Families

When talking to the staff at Ochoa, discussions revolved around the needs of students, but the staff there recognize that a critical aspect when meeting the needs of students is also meeting the needs of parents and families. One key part of supporting families is providing education to families in the form of tools and resources. Staff at Ochoa described how they are often passing on resources and tools created by local agencies to families. Although not all of the parents use these resources, the director of the center has the mindset that it is better to pass them along than not, just in case they might be useful. The staff also recognize that the work done at home is just as, if not more, important as the work they do at the center, *"the resources that we are using, us in the center, as well as the families, are really helping the kids have more growth and more developmental growth, and I cannot take all the credit for it".* Often times these resources are simple techniques or strategies such as a song to sing while washing hands, or a game to play during free time. Importantly, these resources are provided to all families in the center to avoid targeting or calling out one particular family as needing extra support.

Sometimes, there's been places where they do like screening fairs... and we're going to have free, you know, ASQ evaluations there for families... I kind of make it an open invitation to everybody. I say, oh, there's going to be this resource fair to all the families, and they're going to have evaluations. And so, I kind of give it to the parents, to the whole group to kind of get to the parents that don't want or don't feel targeted by me offering these resources like they don't feel alone because I'm doing it more general.

Another key element to support parents and families is building a strong a trusting relationship with them. The director of the center discussed that they have students who are five years old who have been at the center since they were toddlers. The longevity of relationships and the number of students at the center showcase the trusting relationship families have with the staff at Ochoa. The director described that families are willing to share the difficulties they may be having outside of school with their personal lives and other intimate knowledge because they trust her so deeply. The director described her relationship with families when she said, *"I don't see them as external family, but I see them as my friends, my family, even though I do have that boundary of you know, they are the families and I am a*

provider, I don't go beyond that. But when I do see that they're concerned, I ask them, you know, are you okay? Is there anything I can help? And I tell them, you know, if you don't want to share now, maybe we can talk later, but I'm here to hear you out if you need anything". The staff at Ochoa described the ways they build trust in two main ways: communication and valuing the small interactions with families

Communication

Everyday, normal communication in addition to larger efforts such as texting, calling, emailing and social media posts are equally important to the staff at Ochoa. Staff at Ochoa ensure they consider the specific preferences of families when communicating with them, both in regards to the medium and the time of they day. This level of specificity and catering service to the specific needs of specific families is an integral part of the trust building process as it shows that the staff at Ochoa are listening to families and their needs.

Another element of communication that the staff emphasized was transparency. This included transparency in what is happening at school, informing families if there will be visitors at school, and much more. The director of the center also has created a handbook for the center that serves as another form of written transparency so families understand the center and its policies.

Communication and transparency in big and small ways have been pivotal tools the staff at Ochoa have used to build trust with families.

Valuing Small Interactions

Staff at Ochoa mentioned that many of their interactions with parents are in the small moments of the day such as pick-up and drop-off. Those moments often serve as informal opportunities to stay up to date with parents. Staff described talking about anything and everything during small moments such as, following-up on the status of evaluations, trying to schedule a meeting, or keeping parents informed on the happenings of the day (e.g., a student did not nap well or scraped their knee during play) and more.

These are also the types of interactions that showcase the care the staff at Ochoa have for the parents. For example, the director of the center will take these moments to wish the parents a happy birthday and check-in on how they are doing or if there is any support they need.

The staff at Ochoa understand the cumulative effect of these small moments as an integral part of the trust-building process.

Continually Improving

The director of the center, throughout the interview, discussed how she uses all of the resources and tools available to her through the county and other local agencies. The director feels as though to provide the best service possible to students and parents, ensuring that she is up to date in her practice is an essential component to that high-quality service. She mentioned attending numerous workshops, being a part of local networking groups, utilizing coaches and mentors, and saving as many resource sheets and guides she is able to. This allows her to meet the needs of her many students. It also allows her to lean on those coaches and mentors in times when she is

Taking the pictures, taking the notes, everything that we have to do to get this work done that you know, is obviously to benefit the kids and their families. They have a platform, Learning Genie, where we have to upload the kids pictures and writing our observations on them, and that has really helped me more to reduce my work a little bit, because I'm taking the pictures, and while the kids nap, I get on the tablet and I start uploading the pictures and start uploading all the reports or notes on each kid.

struggling, *"I was telling my coach like, I'm drained because I have had to look for a lot of resources, especially because I have to prepare, and I have to take this workshop and that workshop to see how I can help each child"*. By being apart of these networks, and larger groups it has also evolved her practice to be rooted in notes, documentation and evidence. The director and her staff described the copious amounts of notes, and documentation they keep on each child and their needs to be able to understand each child well and accurately track their development over time. The professional learning, resources, coaching and process of documentation are often time-consuming and draining for the staff at Ochoa, but they centered these elements as important ways they continually improve and serve students.

Conclusion

The staff, and in particular the director, at Ochoa are performing a juggling act. Between the central focus to serve students (at a 7:1 student to staff ratio) and ensure they are in truly inclusive, least restrictive environments, the need to serve families to ensure they feel trust in the staff and are well-informed, the director's role in follow-ups so families utilize the Resource and Referral system, continued professional learning, overseeing staff, budgets and payroll and the need to upkeep the center and its physical furnishings, there is a lot that the staff at Ochoa do to maintain a high-quality family child care center. Despite how exhausting the work can be, they would always bring their ideas back to the students. Students, their needs and their experiences are at the forefront of their minds when talking about their work. The staff at Ochoa are proud of their work and continue to work because of the importance they see in their work and the difference they can make.