Developing and Supporting Early Childhood Teacher Leaders: A Leadership Project Connecting University, Community and Public School Resources[*]

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Abstract

The empowerment of early childhood educators as teacher leaders can translate into effective instructional practices that promote children's development. This paper aims to broaden the discussion about the relationship between early childhood educators and their traditional K-12 counterparts. We seek to present a wider exploration of what it takes to develop and maintain systemic changes in thinking– the philosophies, the perceptions, the policies and the commitments that are necessary in creating sustained educational change.

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2 Sumario en espanol

La autorización de educadores tempranos de niñez como líderes de maestro pueden traducir a las prácticas instruccionales efectivas que promueven el desarrollo de niños. Este papel se propone ampliar la discusión acerca de la relación entre educadores tempranos de niñez y su tradicional K-12 contrapartes. Procuramos presentar una exploración más ancha de lo que toma para desarrollar y mantener cambios sistémicos en pensar − las filosofías, las percepciones, las políticas y los compromisos que son necesarios en crear sostuvieron cambio educativo.

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3 Introduction

The empowerment of early childhood educators as teacher leaders can translate into effective instructional practices that promote children's development. This paper aims to broaden the discussion about the relationship between early childhood educators and their traditional K-12 counterparts. We seek to present a wider exploration of what it takes to develop and maintain systemic changes in thinking – the philosophies, the perceptions, and the policies that are needed to create sustained educational change.

Traditionally, early childhood education and K-12 education have operated as separate systems, with infrequent opportunities for professionals to share their philosophies, goals and perceptions or to discuss how policies and practices affect children and families transitioning from early childhood to K-12 programs. This article describes a very promising effort to link a regional and university-based teacher leadership program, which had previously been unavailable to early childhood educators, with an enthusiastic cadre of early childhood educators in an urban region of a northwestern state.

This project, designed to build a connected system, began with a series of conversations and culminated with an event to bring together ECE and K-12 educators for the purpose of exploring factors that impact building connected systems for children and families from birth throughout the school years. From these *voices in the intersection* of ECE and K-12 education, we share themes about successes, emerging practices, and barriers to developing connected systems in local school communities. We also suggest directions for future discourse and study about building connected educational systems that encompass all learners and all educators.

4 Framing the Conversations: Leadership Research

Early childhood leadership research and K-12 leadership research share similar issues and questions. Both fields examine how societal changes necessitate changes in educational systems to support children and families. Both fields advocate for recognizing and supporting the broadening leadership roles of educators in current educational settings. This has required a shift from focusing only on the actions of those in *traditional* leadership positions (e.g., superintendents and principals in K-12 systems, and directors in ECE systems) to a broader focus on leadership activities of *all* educators in an educational system. Both fields increasingly recognize that more sophisticated analytical approaches are required for capturing the complexity of what contributes to teacher quality and effectiveness (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

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[1] http://www.ncpeapublications.org

An underlying assumption for teacher leadership is that teachers can lead the way for continuous improvement of teaching and learning, with increased student achievement (Bowman, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; DiRanna & Loucks-Horsley, 2000; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wynne, 2001). Additionally, there is a recognition that teachers who are central to the growth of learning in a school are well situated to share in leading the efforts to transform teaching and learning (Harris, A., Day, C., Hadfield, M., Hopkins, D., Hargreaves, A., & Chapman, C., 2002; Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996).

School improvement literature calls for the active involvement of teachers, yet the research in the area of early childhood identifies leadership with the director-position, with little regard for the classroom teacher. Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs (2004) claimed that the literature on early childhood leadership does not connect with that on school leadership, despite the fact that many parallels might be expected. In a study that explored attitudes of a group of early childhood professionals, Woodrow (2002) found that "the construction of leadership that emerged was predominately managerial and seen to work against the potential for collaborative and reciprocal relationships within the early childhood sites studied" (p. 87). This study went on to reveal that leadership was perceived in the traditional managerial sense and limited the potential for transformative curriculum or leadership at those sites.

Goffin and Washington (2007) stated that resolving early care and education's current challenges of purpose, identity and responsibility "necessitates moving beyond reliance on individual leaders and toward creation of a field-wide community of diverse leaders" (p. 3). Lieberman and Miller (2005) advocated for policies that support teachers to "assume roles as researchers, mentors, scholars, and developers...." (p. 153). Rodd (1998) indicated that recognition of the leadership role and a broader conceptualization of their professional role and associated skills is necessary if members of the early childhood field are to be able to meet the demands for competent program administrators, supervisors, trainers, educators, researchers and advocates.

As teachers consider new opportunities to lead and serve, the cultural conditions of the school matter a great deal (Fullan, 2001; Harris, 2004; Phelps, 2008; Reeves, 2008; Scribner, Sawyer, Watson & Myers, 2007). In a study of early childhood educator competencies, there was much discussion about the inclusion of leadership as a teacher competency. While some felt that the term implied a hierarchical style of management, others regarded leadership as inclusive, applying to everyone in the field, and felt that by including leadership as a competency, early childhood educators would be encouraged to regard themselves as leaders (CSCCE, 2008). Much of the existing research in early childhood leadership has focused on the context specific roles of early childhood leaders (Bloom, 2000, Jorde Bloom, 2000).

In a study of early childhood managers, Rodd (1997) found that most of the roles identified as leadership roles by participants focused on maintenance rather than development and were in fact, managerial rather than leadership roles. Teacher leaders break from the isolation and privacy that characterize schools (Fullan, 2001; Phelps, 2008; Reeves, 2008; Scribner, et. al, 2007) to interact with other professionals. It is widely believed that early childhood educators experience an even higher degree of isolation and privacy than their K-12 counterparts.

Early childhood and K-12 leadership research acknowledge that collaborative leadership approaches, rather than previous hierarchical models, are better suited to the complexity and diversity of contemporary educational settings. Kagan and Bowman (1997) acknowledged that in the past, leadership theory may not have been appropriate to early childhood because of its hierarchical, top down orientation. Further, they claimed that the more modern leadership approaches which support collaborative leadership and respect the role of gender in leadership development are more in concert with early childhood principles and practices.

Both fields suggest that leadership development be grounded in practice, with colleagues working on educational issues applicable to the systems in which they operate. Jorde Bloom and Rafanello (1994) indicated that key elements of effective models to increase the professional development opportunities of early childhood directors include addressing both management and leadership functions, using a problem-centered approach, and promoting collegiality and networking. Sparks (2002), provided a conceptualization of professional learning and leadership development through cases of action-oriented individuals and groups of teachers. Both ECE and K-12 leadership research promote a flatter, less hierarchical structure, based on collaboration and power sharing.

According to Isenberg (1979), teacher leaders exhibit their skill in the early childhood setting first and foremost by the way in which he or she leads children for learning. Secondly, a relational role is paramount as early childhood leaders interact with many adults as routine work, whether they are staff, parents, and agency representatives.

Investigating gender- specific leadership learning is necessary in early childhood and early elementary settings where educators are predominantly female (Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Flumerfelt, Feun, & Maxfield, in press 2010; Kagan & Bowman, 1997).

Since the 1980s there has been a growing collection of literature on women in leadership, both in management and in education. Some of this material has argued the case for a women's perspective on leadership (Gosetti & Rusch 1995) and some of it has researched how women lead (Shakeshaft, 1989). Flumerfelt, et al, (in press, 2010) stated that participants in their study "indicated a most highly ranked preference for simulation, mentorship, internship, and field-based work, regardless of gender" (p. 23).

Although these fields share similar issues and questions, the intersection between ECE leadership research and K-12 leadership research is small. ECE leadership research focuses primarily on pre-K settings, ignoring the early elementary grades, and more on early childhood administrators than teachers. K-12 leadership research focuses on change in K-12 settings, leaving out early childhood programs as part of the system, and includes an emphasis on both administrators and teacher leaders as a way to understand and encourage changes in educational cultures and systems.

5 Beginning the Conversation: Two Voices

Like-minded people tend to find each other. Two assistant professors at a major Midwestern University came to the world of higher education from lengthy previous careers in education and a good deal of experience as change agents in their respective fields. They soon developed a relationship through their work on faculty and community activities. They also taught graduate courses in their respective fields, educational leadership and early childhood education, in adjacent classrooms. At breaks during the long evening courses, they discussed similar themes they were exploring in their course content, such as educational cultures, system-building activities, and models of leadership for institutional change. In many ways their relationship exemplified the potential for building an effective relationship between early childhood and K-12 educational programs.

The early childhood professor began to attend workshops organized by the educational leadership professor through an Institute on Teacher Leadership. She was interested in how the work in teacher leadership and school change was applicable to her research in early childhood advocacy and leadership. It became apparent that only a few early childhood educators attended these workshops, and that most of the conversations were focused on K-12 education. From this unassuming beginning, the professors joined with colleagues from various educational communities to continue to talk about how to more formally develop opportunities for conversations between early childhood and K-12 educators.

Concurrent with these conversations, the early childhood professor and two doctoral students who were also interested in early childhood leadership issues began discussing possibilities for fieldwork that would support the students' dissertation research. The professor participates in various community early care and education groups, and collaborates with these groups to do research on early childhood leadership and components of quality programs. Each of the doctoral students has a full time career and leadership role in early childhood agencies in the local community. One of the doctoral students is an early childhood consultant with the county Intermediate School District (ISD). In this role, she facilitates meetings of early childhood program directors in the local school districts in the county. She also provides on-site consultation for early childhood programs situated in local districts. The other doctoral student is a project specialist for a local state-funded collaborative that focuses on early childhood system building. She facilitates task groups of leaders representing a wide range of early childhood education, social service, mental health and medical agencies in the county.

An understanding of the local community guided the conversations that the professor and students had both in terms of identifying issues that were relevant to explore and study, and in terms of which agencies and individuals would be key stakeholders to support this exploration.

6 Focusing the Conversation: Early Childhood Voices

In June, 2008, an Early Childhood Leadership Forum was co-hosted by the university, the regional educational service agency's department of early childhood education and statewide public agencies for directors of early childhood programs in surrounding school districts, representing tuition-based preschool and childcare, Head Start, and state funded early childhood programs.

The focus of this leadership forum was to gain a better understanding of the needs of these directors regarding their own leadership development, their roles as mentors of other future leaders, and the kinds of opportunities they felt would be most beneficial to them in terms of future leadership development.

Two recurring themes emerged from the focus group discussions that guided the next steps in the ongoing conversation. *First,* while early childhood directors were able to identify their leadership skills and felt competent to navigate relationships with their staff, families and community members, they often experienced barriers and felt disconnected when it came to navigating relationships in the larger educational community.

Their examples included feeling marginalized or left out of educational and curricular conversations and professional development opportunities, discrepancies in pay, benefits and tenure for ECE and K-12 teachers, and lack of funds and/or resources for program maintenance and development.

Second, these ECE directors worried about that the future generation of ECE professionals were not coming into the field with the leadership skills necessary to keep early childhood education clearly in view of educational, community, and legislative decision makers.

Based on the insights gained from the leadership forum and subsequent workshops, conversations began to focus on two general goals:

- In what ways could school district teams be encouraged to view the early childhood staff as part of their team?
- In what ways could the concepts of teacher leadership be applied to leadership development for early childhood educators? In what ways were opportunities for teacher leadership development similar or different in ECE and K-12 settings?

7 Expanding the Conversation: Blending ECE and K-12 Voices

During the following year, several planning meetings were convened to discuss activities that would support reaching these goals. On August 12, 2009, several stakeholders collaborated to sponsor a forum called *Building a Connected System: Voices in the Intersection of Early Childhood and K-12 Education.* Teams representing several county school districts gathered to hear success stories from two school districts and to participate in within-and-cross-district discussions of what it would take to build a connected system for children from birth throughout the school years. The forum was co-sponsored by the early childhood department and the teacher leadership project at the university, the ISD Early Childhood Department, and a generous grant from the county Early Childhood Collaborative. In order to ensure ownership of the change process by all stakeholders, each school district was encouraged to send a vertical team to the forum that included representatives from ECE programs (both directors and teachers), early elementary teachers, principals, curriculum specialists and superintendents.

The common themes emphasized were the need to create connected systems that fully recognize the importance of early childhood education and how school districts can align their goals, organizational structures and resources accordingly. Teacher leadership was also stressed as an important component in this realignment.

The keynote address summarized current research on the importance of early childhood education and the status of EC programs in the surrounding area with special attention given to the structural connections between early childhood programs and the organizational structure of the district in which the programs were provided. While it was encouraging to note that all 28 districts in the county have early childhood programs, the speaker clearly stated that these programs are not effectively integrated in the districts' administrative structures. Vast differences were noted in what the programs were called, how parents access information

about them, the instructional staff, and how the programs fit in the district's organizational structure. Many of these issues could be resolved by creating connected PK-12 systems in which recognition is given to early childhood educators, ECE and K-12 curriculum is aligned and early childhood administrators and teachers meet regularly with their K-12 colleagues. The keynote speaker articulated the value of such efforts, "Education quality and outcomes would improve substantially if elementary teachers incorporated the best of preschool's emphases and practices and if preschool teachers made more use of those elementary grade practices that are valuable to preschoolers as well."

School district success stories highlighted the development of a comprehensive preschool program that is truly connected to the district's curricular and administrative structure at one district and the creation of district-wide all day kindergarten programs which are effectively integrated into the school system at another.

These opening presentations set the scene for vertical team discussions focused on creating a connected system at the local district level. Teams were asked to identify successes, emerging practices, and barriers to future progress as shown in Table 1. An interesting insight from looking across district's summaries in these three areas was that individual school districts could be at quite different places in the process of building a connected PK-12 system. A barrier for one district was an emerging practice or success for another district.

Successes, emerging practices and barriers identified by ECE leaders

Successes	Early childhood staff included in K-12 professional development days
	Children's portfolios sent from early childhood classrooms to kindergarten classrooms
	Early childhood directors are part of district administrative team
	Long-range planning discussions
	Supportive administration
	Certified teachers in early childhood programs
	Early childhood programs are housed in various K-12 buildings
	Early childhood programs have a strong reputation in the district
	Strong EC curriculum based on state EC standards, which align with K-12 standards
	continued on next page

Emerging practices	Increased collaboration between pre-K and Kg
	Including pre-k teachers in staff meetings (building level)
	Professional development planning committee – collaborative Pre-K and Kg PD
	Establishing transition meeting opportunities
	NAEYC accreditation for early childhood programs (increase status, quality, recognition)
	Response to Intervention process beginning to include early childhood classrooms
	Community awareness activities of EC programs in the district
	Survey of parents – needs regarding transition from EC to Kg
	Welcoming community preschool programs (non-district based) to professional development events
Barriers	EC and K-12 schedules for professional development not aligned
	Different funding sources for EC and K-12
	Uncertain funding for EC (tuition-based success affected by economy, federal and state funded programs can be affected by current legislation)
	Difficult for EC to maintain high quality staff year to year (due to lower salaries)
	Perception of EC staff as less than equal faculty members
	Few opportunities for conversations with community (non-district) EC programs/staff
	Parent in EC programs do not feel they can participate in building Parent-Teacher Organizations

Table 1

Having reflected on these successes and concerns, groups were asked to generate ideas about what a "connected system" looks like. To set the tone for the discussion, each table was equipped with a tool kit and a set of Lego blocks to create a model of a connected system. The words and phrases generated during this activity can be organized in the following themes:

- All stakeholders (Board, administration, community) must recognize the value of early childhood programs.
- Integrate early childhood in district's vision, goals, and overall strategic plan.
- Communication between ECE and K-12 must be on-going and intentional.
- Establish a PK-12 focus in all areas of district operations and structure including curriculum and human resource development.
- Secure stable funding.
- Align Pre-K and K-12 curriculum

- Marketing and communication with community about PK-12 VISION

The response to the *Building a Connected System* forum was overwhelmingly positive. A powerful outcome for many participants was the opportunity to talk, problem-solve and share perspectives with others from their own district. Participants also shared that that in addition to learning about ideas and strategies from other districts, they appreciated knowing that there were many common successes as well as barriers across districts. They wanted to continue the conversation that had begun during the forum.

8 Creating an Environment for Teacher Leadership

Early childhood educators have fundamentally been disenfranchised in the literature on leadership, despite the fact that it is the same child who will learn discovery and exploration from a preschool teacher, prealgebraic formulae from a middle school teacher or the love of prose from a literature teacher. Early childhood education has widely languished outside the inner circle of K-12 education–without a clear acknowledgment of its role as a critical partner in the education of all children.

According to Stone (2000), the difficulty in attempting to empower early childhood professionals as leaders relates to status issues within society, and regrettably within the field of education as well. "We've been faced, historically, with a limited public understanding of what we do, why we do it, how we do it, how we've been trained, how much we know, and the extent of our contributions to families and communities" (p.29). Rust (1993) identified this obstacle: "Early childhood education is not widely recognized as a distinct and well-articulated field of education. It is perceived as 'women's work,' with concomitant low status and low pay" (p. 104).

Harris (2004) theorized that the concept of distributed leadership, with its emphasis on increased capacity through shared leadership may be applied to the field of early childhood education. This linkage to educational leadership research is particularly relevant to a field that is diverse, complex and maintains strong community relationships. Barth (2001) stressed the importance of shared leadership to systematically "improve schools from within". Fullan (2001), Lieberman and Miller (2004), and DuFour and Eaker (1998) echoed Barth in arguing that the complex process of school improvement can be successful only if it involves everyone throughout the organization.

Because few teachers begin their careers with a vision for a leadership role in the future, new teachers must be encouraged to assume these roles in their schools, and the larger school district and educational community (Quinn, Haggard, & Ford, 2006). *Building a Connected System: Voices in the Intersection of Early Childhood and K-12* provided a rich, context-based professional development opportunity for early childhood and K-12 educators alike. Fleet and Patterson (2001) contended that each teacher's experience regarding professional development is "complex, unpredictable, and dependent on contextual influences" (p. 10) and that traditional in-service training denies teachers the richness of growth contexts and overlooks the diversity of staff in early childhood centers. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) also wrote extensively on the importance of recognizing and valuing teachers' knowledge. From our work with teacher leaders, we have found that you simply cannot expect positive results when you send a *changed* teacher back to an *unchanged* school.

The two worlds are coming into closer alignment, with many state preschool initiatives seeking educational linkages and compensation parity for preschool and K-12 teachers. There are likely to be even more conversation at the intersection between the two fields: Early Childhood and K-12 teachers will attend the same college- or university-based teaching preparation programs, they will have to meet the same requirements for certification and continuing education, and they will probably encounter the same approaches toward ongoing professional development.

In this emerging field, there are numerous questions as to how teachers function, if the leadership roles they assume are informal or formal, how they are supported within their respective systems, and how these teacher leaders operate differently within their classrooms. Specifically, we experienced the dilemma of early childhood teachers who have developed into teacher leaders by default, with limited training and support. Their high degree of autonomy had initially arisen from their segregation from K-12. Subsequently, we found

that early childhood teachers thrive as leaders in school districts where there is a seamless transition from early childhood education through graduation, support for teacher leadership and high-quality professional development.

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