

CRITICAL ABSENCE IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION: FRAMING THE (MISSING) DISCOURSE OF LEADERSHIP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS*

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Sumario en español

Muchos estudios han notado el efecto fuerte y positivo de liderazgo educativo en el logro de estudiante, en la cultura de la escuela, y en otros aspectos del ambiente educativo (Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty,

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2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Aguas, Marzano, & McNulty, 2005; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). La investigación actual también señala inequívocamente hacia liderazgo como un factor importante en el logro de calidad en la mayoría de las instituciones educativas. El liderazgo ha sido citado como segundo sólo a la instrucción del aula en su contribución al logro (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). A pesar de que la importancia de liderazgo haya sido establecida en el campo de la educación en general, la investigación en el liderazgo en ajustes tempranos de niñez ha estado faltando. Aún más, la investigación en esta área es dominada por sólo unos investigadores, con la mayor parte de los estudios para ser realizados como disertaciones (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004).

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1 The Importance of Leadership

Many studies have noted the strong and positive effect of educational leadership on student achievement, school culture, and other aspects of the educational environment (Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2005; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). Current research also points unequivocally toward leadership as an important factor in the achievement of quality in most educational institutions. Leadership has been cited as second only to classroom instruction in its contribution to achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Despite the fact that the importance of leadership has been established in the field of education in general, research on leadership in early childhood settings has been lacking. Further, the research in this area is dominated by only a few researchers, with most of the studies being conducted as dissertations (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to (a) highlight this critical absence in the field of educational administration, (b) critically examine the reasons underlying this missing discourse, (c) present the pertinent existing literature, and (d) articulate the potential implications of continued scholarship in this area. Previous findings suggest that continued efforts in the area of leadership in early childhood settings have implications for educational practice and theory.

1.1 The Importance of Leadership in Early Childhood

In any discussion of leadership it is important to establish a common definition; this is difficult in the field of early childhood for which no agreed upon definition exists. Rodd (1998) suggested that a specific definition is lacking because the term *leadership* in early childhood education has remained vague and incomplete. Highlighting this definitional absence, Kagan and Bowman (1997) stated, “Despite this attention to leadership the field does not have a commonly accepted definition of leadership, nor has it engaged in a systematic collaborative discussion of the properties of leadership” (p. xi).

Researchers have postulated several theories as to why such a definition does not exist. When addressing this issue, Muijs et al. (2004) highlighted two reasons for this absence. First, early childhood leaders tend to view themselves “first and foremost as educators” (p. 158). Second, Muijs et al. asserted that leaders in early childhood have a “narrow view of their role”—tending to focus on the “interactions with children” rather than the managerial role (p. 158). Kagan (as cited in Culkin, 2000) argued that the lack of focus on leadership in the field of early childhood education is due to a form of isolation that is unique to early childhood education. She also stated that the field has tended to focus on the child–teacher dynamic because it is “simply easier than focusing on the entire system” (p. ix).

Rodd (1998), on the other hand, cited a “historical division between research and academic staff and early childhood professionals” as a reason for the discrepancy (p. 142). According to Rodd, this division has led early childhood professionals to become “consumers rather than producers of research” (Rodd, 1998, p. 142). This situation has perpetuated the view that early childhood administrators represent a lower status

group that tends to be more focused on practice than theory and, therefore, not as interested in theories of leadership (Almy, 1988).

Rodd (2006) offered another reason for the discrepancy: namely, that leaders in early childhood education tend to focus on their effect on program quality rather than the “recognition of the concept of individual leadership potential,” which could ultimately “advance the professionalization [*sic*] of the early childhood field and achieve still much-needed advances in community credibility and status” (p. 10).

In an attempt to move the field forward in its pursuit of a definition of early childhood leadership, Rodd (2006) asserted that although management and leadership are both needed for the development of quality in the early childhood setting, there is a significant difference between the two. Rodd defined management as being concerned with the daily operations of the program, sustaining and maintaining status quo. Leadership, on the other hand, as defined by Rodd, is concerned with improvement of the organization through vision and philosophy; it is “forward thinking.” It may be said then that management focuses on maintenance and leadership on development.

Although the field of leadership continues to search for a common definition, research in this area has demonstrated that leadership can positively affect job satisfaction levels, impact staff turnover, and affect organizational culture (Culkin, 1994; Hayden, 1997; Jorde-Bloom, 1997; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). These findings are important as high quality programs have been shown to have the greatest positive impact on student achievement (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). One childcare study found that only 14% of the centers in the United States were considered good to excellent. The critical factor for quality in each of those centers was the work experience of the director (Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995). In a deeper analysis of the Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes study it was found that the educational level of the director correlated with the quality of the childcare center. If the director’s education level was high, the childcare center’s quality was high; if the director’s education level was low, the center’s quality was poor (Mocan, Burchinal, Morris, & Helburn, 1995). Another example of the positive impact of leadership was noted in a study of Head Start programs. Ramey et al. (2000) found that strong committed leadership was associated with successful, high quality programs.

Howes, James, and Ritchie (2003), in their investigation of aspects of supervision in the early childhood environment, found that the leader’s educational level not only had a positive effect on teaching but also could predict the presence of reflective supervision. In their study, effective teaching was defined by a teacher’s responsive involvement, engagement in language during play with children, and provision of language activities for children. Reflective supervision included regular meetings with a supervisor, discussions regarding specific children and teaching strategies, and observation by the supervisor. Clearly, directors can play an important role in supporting teachers.

Although research has established the importance of leadership in early childhood, it seems that society as a whole has not acknowledged this fact and has tended not to attribute professional status to the field (Larkin, 1999). Evidence of this tendency can be demonstrated in three areas: salary, educational qualifications, and career paths. The following section examines leadership in early childhood in these three areas.

1.2 Leadership in Early Childhood: A Question of Status

Salary can be viewed as a reflection of the value society places on an occupation: the higher the salary, the more respected the position (Hodge, 1996). It is interesting to note that leaders in the early childhood arena tend to be the lowest paid when compared to leaders in other educational areas; they receive significantly lower pay than their elementary and secondary school peers. In May 2008, preschool and childcare program administrators earned median annual wages of \$39,940. The middle 50% earned between \$31,290 and \$54,680. The lowest 10% earned less than \$25,910, and the highest 10% earned more than \$77,150. During that same period elementary and secondary school administrators earned median annual wages of \$83,880. The middle 50% earned between \$68,360 and \$102,830. The lowest 10% earned less than \$55,580, and the highest 10% earned more than \$124,250 (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). Equally as troubling is the fact that nearly a quarter of all teachers and administrators in the early childhood field have incomes that fall almost 200% below the poverty line (Herzenberg, Price, & Bradley, 2005).

The level of educational qualifications is another measure of the value society ascribes to leadership in the early childhood setting. The minimum qualification for a public school principal or assistant principal is a master's degree in education or educational leadership. Preschool leaders, on the other hand, typically have no such requirement (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Although there has been a movement in many states to require credentials for preschool leaders, most require only some higher education credits but not a full undergraduate degree (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). In fact, since 1983 the educational level of administrators in the field has fallen consistently, with fewer and fewer administrators possessing at least a 4-year college degree (Herzenberg et al., 2005).

Professional positions tend to follow a designated career path. For example, an elementary or high school principal will have held a position as assistant principal before taking on the role of principal. There is typically no designated path to administration in most early childhood settings. A teacher can become an administrator with little or no training or experience, generally being promoted from within (Bredenkamp, 1995; Culkin, 2000; Larkin, 1999). Although this phenomenon has facilitated the promotion of more women into leadership positions, it also has resulted in a field of leaders who may not be well prepared for the intricate level of work required. In a society in which salary and education are the credentials for credibility, it is little wonder that preschool leaders are not as respected or taken as seriously as their peers in the field of education (Rodd, 1998).

1.3 What Does Gender Have To Do With It?

Early childhood education is one of the few educational arenas in which women are dominant in both leadership and follower positions (Rodd, 2006; Whitebook & Phillips, 1999). It is also an area that has not been affected by a shift in the distribution of traditionally gendered occupations over the years (Wootton, 1997). Early childhood remains one of the few fields in which women continue to make up the largest percentage of employees, with men representing less than 2% (Sargent, 2004). What are the implications of this trend for leadership in early childhood and the field as a whole?

Park (2000) asserted that a gendered division of labor may arise when organizational roles are institutionalized, with jobs' becoming segregated along gender lines. This situation often leads to the notion that some work is more appropriate for women and other kinds of work for men. According to Park, this notion can result in a "gender-role hierarchy" where "jobs identified as (culturally) feminine and allocated to (biological) women are undervalued and underpaid" (p. 286). This phenomenon certainly seems to be the case in the field of early childhood education.

In addition, Fromberg (2003) argued that one of the major reasons for this devaluation is related to the fact that the work of "motherhood as taken-for-granted, unpaid labor" is prevalent, and, therefore, early childhood education is similarly viewed (p. 177). Larkin (1999) concurred with this view stating that the low status of the field is "due in part to the care and education of young children being primarily a women's occupation associated with a long history of women being responsible for nurturing future generations without special preparation or qualifications" (p. 21). In other words, mothers do this naturally, so how hard can it really be?

Stonehouse (1994) argued that the low status attributed to the field reflects the value society places on those who are directly involved with young children. Stonehouse further suggested that working with young children equates to low status and that, in fact, the younger the child the lower the status. Childcare is associated with a lower and possibly negative image; the work in this field is generally not highly regarded.

2 Implications for the Fields of Early Childhood Education and Educational Administration

Although research in this area is limited, those who have written on the subject have argued that leadership in early childhood is fundamentally different (Bloom, 2000; Rodd, 2006). Nivala (2002) suggested that the early childhood setting is unique and therefore requires a unique leadership style, one that emphasizes community and understands and can facilitate groups and group work. Kagan (1994) postulated that early

childhood settings support a different leadership model because they tend to be intimate and collaborative, emphasizing more of a “we’re in this together” kind of strategy. This tendency may explain why the field has had difficulty conducting research in the area of leadership and early childhood.

Kinney (1992) argued that although women in early childhood leadership positions perform the same duties as their male counterparts in other educational arenas, women tend to rely on facilitation as a style whereas men are more likely to rely on power and authority. Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon (2000), in a study conducted with childcare center directors, found that conventional management and leadership theories were not applicable and did not resonate with the center directors. In fact, the researchers argued that leaders in the field of early childhood are developing a new and unique language of leadership that is built on feminist models.

Historically, theories on leadership characteristics and behaviors have been based on a male perspective (Blackmore, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989). In a review of general leadership theories, Kagan (1994) highlighted the fact that studies tended to ignore the most important characteristics of the early childhood environment, namely the shared leadership model, sense of community, intimacy, and collaborative nature that tend to define the early childhood organizational structure. Northouse (2007), in his overview of research on leadership, concluded that women are simply different from men and, thus, lead differently. This certainly appears to be the case in situations such as early childhood, where women predominate.

With regard to women and their leadership styles, Gilligan’s (1982) work on women’s psychological and moral development has had tremendous influence. In her work on women’s psychological and social development, Gilligan argued that women often experience the world in a way that is fundamentally different from the way men do. Gilligan characterized men’s perspective on the world as being organized around justice—making decisions based on moral principles that are independent of relationships and social contexts. In contrast, women’s moral development, Gilligan pointed out, centers on the idea of nurturing, interdependence, and connection, which she called an “ethic of care.” This difference in moral development, Gilligan argued, manifests itself in the different ways women lead; therefore, women lead and administer differently from men. Gilligan stated,

As we have listened for centuries to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women but the difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak. Yet in the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the failure of connection. The failure to see the different reality of women’s lives and to hear the differences in their voices stems in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 173)

Gilligan’s (1982) work has influenced numerous studies, including that of Helgesen (1990). Helgesen conducted a case study of successful women leaders in various industries. Through observations and in-depth interviews, Helgesen developed a theory of leadership she believed was unique to women. She called this leadership style a “web of inclusion.” In her book, *Web of Inclusion*, Helgesen described her findings with regard to a woman’s way of organizing her workplace. She used the spider’s web as a metaphor to illustrate a kind of organic leadership style (Kouzes & Posner, 1993). A literal spider’s web is spun in such a way that each thread is connected to the others; Helgesen asserted that a woman’s leadership style is connective, like a spider’s web, tying the various aspects of the organization together. A spider’s web has no hierarchy but is connected and integrated; also, according to Helgesen, is women’s leadership. Helgesen stated further that in the web of inclusion, the leader is not at the top as in a more hierarchical or pyramid shaped system; in the web, the woman is at the center of the organization, supporting a “web of concern.” This style of leadership has flexibility and adaptability as its foundation. Helgesen’s findings highlight the idea that women, when allowed the opportunity, may have a leadership style that is unique to them.

Other researchers have concurred with Helgesen’s view, arguing that women’s style of leadership tends to be more nurturing, collaborative, and inclusive (Adler, 2005; Chin, 2004; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Greenberg & Sweeney, 2005; Rosener, 1990). Collectively, these women-focused researchers suggested that women tend to experience and execute leadership differently than do men.

Beck (1992) found the idea of caring to be so vital to women's leadership style that it needed to be placed at the top of the hierarchy of values. Beck argued that all other values were "informed and guided by caring" (p. 29). Educational environments led by women tend to be characterized by the development and maintenance of caring relationships (Cohen, 1989).

The field of leadership in early childhood seems to resonate with this more feminized leadership model. In a study of 257 early childhood directors, Jorde-Bloom (1998) analyzed the metaphors used by the directors to describe their roles and organizations and found several recurring themes. When describing their organizations, directors used the metaphor of family, haven, or garden to describe the caring and nurturing atmosphere. The idea of the organization's being caring and nurturing is central to the ethic of care described in Gilligan's work (1982) and to the premise of Beck's (1992) work in women's leadership models. Other prevalent metaphors about the organization fell into the category of "making connections" and the "centrality of relationships" (Bloom, 2002, p. 63). The directors emphasized the importance of cultivating and managing relationships in their organizations. Bloom compared this notion to Helgesen's (1990) web of inclusion metaphor highlighting the importance of connections and relationships. Jorde-Bloom noted, however, that although the directors used a variety of metaphors to describe their role as leader, from tightrope walker to wheel hub, the theme of power and influence was conspicuously missing from all of the director's metaphors. This finding is consistent with other literature in the field of women's leadership style (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003).

Brunner (1998) asserted that, unlike men, who tend to use power as a method of control, women use power for collaboration and organization. The research in this area also highlights the idea that women tend to share power by collaborating, including others, and building consensus (Cohen, 1989). In line with this finding, Loden (1985) found that women often use a team concept as a form of collaboration within the organizational structure.

As previously noted, Henderson-Kelly and Pamphilon (2000) asserted that leaders in early childhood are on the verge of developing a new kind of leadership model. Building on the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986), Henderson-Kelly and Pamphilon identified four wisdoms—people wisdom, emotional wisdom, role wisdom, and resource wisdom—as important for leadership in early childhood. The researchers asserted that combining these wisdoms with the research of Belenky et al. would create a paradigm for effective leadership in early childhood.

3 Summary

This critical literature review demonstrates the need for an expanded theory on leadership as it relates to early childhood settings. It also reveals that leadership in early childhood settings has been an under researched area of study. Among the few research studies focusing on this area, none have explored how women currently holding leadership positions in early childhood settings make meaning of leadership. This omission has resulted, particularly, in the absence of a theory to explain the nature of leadership in the early childhood setting as experienced by women.

As noted here, the research literature also suggests that women tend to experience and relate to leadership differently from men and that leadership is context specific. Given that early childhood education is a field dominated by women leaders and followers, these findings indicate that there is a particular and unique culture of leadership afforded by the early childhood setting. Future research is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in early childhood (Kagan & Bowman, 1997). Such research may help narrow the divide between academia and early childhood education professionals, ultimately professionalizing the field further (Rodd, 1998). Findings from this line of inquiry may begin to facilitate the development of leadership training programs that more adequately support the work in early childhood settings. In addition, findings from this work have the potential to add to the body of knowledge focused on the relationship between context and leadership. Finally, this research serves to broaden the discussion about women and leadership in general.

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