Early Care and Education Leadership: Toward a Theory of Essential Experiences, Skills and Knowledge for Effective Early Care and Education Change Agents

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the ways in which mid-career intermediary early care and educations leaders, "change agents among change agents," have prepared themselves for leadership roles given the lack of articulated competencies and pathways to ECE leadership. Thousands of ECE leadership roles in which persons are responsible for informing, developing and implementing policy and practice standards for the ECE field, and working in politically charged settings, are being filled across the country. Yet little is known about those filling these roles and scant attention has been paid the educational and professional development needs of these leaders. This study used a constructivist grounded theory methodological approach to learn about the lived experiences of nine mid-career intermediary leaders, and from this derive a contribution to a theory of essential skills, knowledge, and experiences for effective ECE leadership. Findings indicate that participants in this study, regardless of whether they had prior experience in the ECE field, identified a need for leadership development focused on developing subject matter expertise about the ECE system, political strategies, and communication skills. Findings also indicate that participants experienced a range of challenges as leaders based on age, and that participants of color also experienced leadership challenges because of their race. Findings further indicate that participation in in-depth ECE-based leadership programs and relationships with mentors helped to fill in some knowledge gaps and mitigate some of the challenges experienced because of age or race. The results suggest that a lack of attention to the development of a diverse cadre of field leaders has led to a knowledge gap in the acquisition of leadership competencies, and has undergirded generational and racial tensions among field leaders, amplifying the need for

further research to inform policies, programs, and practices to support the development and promotion of a diverse, well-prepared leaders.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Publically supported child care and preschool programs have dramatically expanded across the United States over the past two decades (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2013). Today, nearly two-thirds three to five-year olds participate in some form of preschool education (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Though only a fraction of this participation currently takes place in publically-funded preschool programs (Barnett, et al., 2013) early care and education has increasingly entered the public domain and become part of public conversations on education as evidenced by President Obama's issuance of a plan for universal preschool (The White House, 2013), dueling publically supported preschool plans in New York (Kaplan & Hernández, 2014) and legislation to add a year prior to kindergarten to the public school in states like California (Steinberg, 2014). The increase in public and private resources directed toward early care and education has fostered the growth of infrastructure organizations--child care resource and referral agencies, local child care planning councils, governmental offices of child care, education, and/or human services, and private foundations--all of which play a critical role in the efforts to improve the condition of early care and education quality. Such growth leaves little doubt that the early care and education field is faced with realities that differ from those of earlier decades. Yet, the attention given in this period to fashioning educational and professional leadership programs in early care and education has been negligible. As a consequence, there are now urgent calls to attend to a leadership challenge and concern that the early care and education field lacks a cadre of diverse leaders prepared to grapple with the increased demands and expectations placed

on early care and education and the 21st century needs of the field (Goffin, 2013; Goffin & Washington, 2007; Taba et al., 1999).

Leadership Today in Early Care and Education

Goffin and Washington (2007) and others (Goffin, 2013; Gable, 2014) present a compelling case that new approaches to and expectations for leadership are now required. Goffin and Washington argue that the complexity of early care and education (ECE) today requires leaders who can "learn to manage political conflict, negotiate differing points of view, and compete with other compelling state needs, demanding a much higher level of strategy and skill" (p.26). Coupled with this call for new types of leadership, however, is the reality that access to educational leadership programs in ECE are few and far between. A 2009 survey (Goffin & Means, 2009) identified 86 distinct programs across the country that focus on leadership development in ECE and found less than a dozen of these programs focused on field-related issues -- most focused on child care center managers and directors -- and of those, only five are degree-based. When this survey was repeated five years later, while they found some uptake in the number of programs that cited leadership skills or policy, it was difficult to ascertain what the focus of those programs actually were, and there remained only five degree-based programs (Goffin & Janke, 2013). This stands in stark contrast to the hundreds of leadership preparation programs in many schools of education that prepare K-12 educators (The Wallace Foundation, 2010).

Failure to appropriately prepare leaders comes with consequences. Chief among them is the reliance on others outside of the field to assume leadership roles and set priorities and policy agendas for ECE (Goffin, 2013; Goffin & Washington, 2007;

Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008). Also of concern are professionals, whether from inside or outside of the field, who too often do not have the comprehensive training that allows them to intimately understand the developmental and educational needs of children, the complexities of the existing system designed to serve them, *and* posses the skills necessary to engage in reforming the disparate system that exists today (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004).

Characteristics and Needs of Early Care and Education Leaders

Notwithstanding a lack of intentional preparation for early care and leaders, leadership roles are being filled. Yet little is known about leaders in a host of new types of professional positions that have emerged in the past decades. Of particular importance is the role of leaders in infrastructure organizations who are frequently charged with the implementation and operation of programs aimed at improving the quality of and access to ECE services and supporting the needs of families (Whitebook, et al., 2010). In California, for example, every county has a publically funded First 5 commission, charged with creating comprehensive systems that support all children from birth though age five in the state to reach their optimal development (First 5 Association of California, 2004). Upwards of $130 million a year is invested by the First 5's in programs focused on improving the quality of ECE services (First 5 Association of California, 2013.), with leaders in each local First 5 making determinations about what programs will be offered, the targeted outcomes of programs, and which providers are eligible to participate. First 5's may prioritize supporting education that advances early educators toward a college degree in early education, others may prioritize professional development training, and yet others may focus on intensive classroom coaching models. The decisions that are

made and the services prioritized are products of a series of choices made by organizational leaders, and are accompanied among other factors, by differing philosophies of the role of ECE teachers and what creates quality ECE, and different price tags—all of which impact the depth and breadth of services.

Despite the relative influence of leaders in infrastructure organizations, only a smattering of studies of ECE leadership exists. Maxwell, Lim and Early (2006) and Whitebook et al. (2010) have conducted studies that reveal racial stratification by position, level of authority, and amount of education. Maxwell and colleagues found that teacher educators are even more racially stratified than the teaching workforce itself, with 80% of faculty identified as White, non-Hispanic (2006). The *Beyond Homes and Center* study (2010) found, though more diverse than college faculty, the staff of infrastructure organizations in California mirrors that of child care center teachers with half being white, followed by Latinos at 31% (p.21). However, the study also found that, like the direct service workforce, agency directors were the least diverse, and the administrative and support staff were the most diverse (p.22).

Each of these studies supports the argument that early care and education leadership fails to reflect the diversity of children served or the teachers and providers who care for and educate them. While this data can be useful in informing the field about the need to develop certain populations of leaders, only Whitebook and colleagues (2010) ask about training, education, and skill levels needed to perform their jobs, and neither study addresses *how* and if leaders have prepared themselves to meet the demands and expectations placed upon them to enact change for the betterment of the children and practitioners served by the field, or where leaders may fall short.

My experience working in multiple roles in ECE informs my approach. I have witnessed firsthand how leadership roles are frequently filled either by people who have acquired degrees not specifically linked to ECE or child development, but instead disciplines such as public policy, social work, legal studies, and elementary education. Others hold degrees in early education or child development, but lack basic knowledge and understanding of systems, policy and politics, and theories of organizations and leadership. Either way, there is an absence of the full understanding of the ECE field and the complex issues that require skilled and well prepared leaders. This is not to suggest that there are no good leaders, but rather, that today's leaders tend to approach leadership in a piecemeal way, attempting to fill in the learning gaps for themselves.

In light of the findings of Whitebook et al. (2010) and Maxwell et al. (2006), inquiring into the development of and enactment of leadership as experienced by people of color and whites is relevant. This seems to be a question of particular interest given the dearth of formal preparation opportunities available. Though it is not within the scope of this study, in the service of developing a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which leadership is operationalized there are multiple contexts in addition to race, in which ECE leadership should be investigated. Of note, there is some suggestion in the research that, proportionate to their presence in the ECE workforce--which is dominated by women--men have a greater presence in the leadership ranks (Whitebook, et al., 2010). Evidence from research on K-12 education, where women also account for the majority of the workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics - U.S. Department Labor, 2012), suggests that men disproportionally hold the highest ranking positions (Dana &

Bourisaw, 2006). The extent to which women are marginalized from leadership in ECE is worthy of investigation.

Tomorrow's Leadership Matters

Leadership matters if indeed we are to reconceptualize and transform the existing ECE system into one that is comprehensive and equitable for all children, and the teachers and providers who care for and educate them. Of particular interest and concern are today's intermediary, mid-career leaders, who are poised to lead the field for decades to come. These intermediary leaders can be described as "change agents among change agents" (Craig, 2001). These are leaders who not only inform and advise others, but who also rely on the contribution of others to inform and advise their work (Craig, 2001) and are collaboratively engaged with others in the implementation of their work. In the ECE field, these types of leaders are typically found in infrastructure organizations and are often responsible for developing quality improvement strategies or the implementation of strategies or directives from a higher authority. This frequently requires that they make decisions about *who* gets to participate or receive services, *what* level or depth of services are available, and *how* services are made accessible for different populations.

Though they already occupy leadership positions, mid-career intermediary leaders are the cadre of leaders who are likely, based-on age and tenure in the field, to continue in the field for at least another twenty years, advancing in their careers as the aging leadership population retires. These leaders have the potential to represent the voice of the field in discussions of policy, practice and research for decades to come.

Research Needs

Extant research on ECE leadership focuses on the development of site-based administration and management, with scant attention paid to the leadership roles outside of direct-service child care and education programs. As a consequence, little is known about best practices for training and developing field leaders, those responsible for developing and implementing a range of ECE policies and programs, and few programs have been established for this purpose. Knowledge in the field does not establish whether or not -- or how well -- the field is responding to its own call for new types of leadership, or whether it is perpetuating the status quo. While inferences can be drawn from individual and collective experiences, a lack of understanding of who ECE leaders are, what type of knowledge and skills they possess, how they have acquired their professional preparation, essential experiences that have informed their leadership, and how ready they are to be effective change agents on behalf of the field, hampers the intentional pursuit of strategies to address the diversification and preparation of ECE leadership. There is a desperate need for data that can offer information on the current state of diversity of ECE leadership as well as the preparedness of leaders for their roles. Further, it is critical to understanding the ways in which leaders, without an articulated pathway or unified set of competencies, have prepared themselves for their leadership responsibilities, in what areas leaders need more skills and knowledge, and what experiences and opportunities support or hamper leadership development. Without this data we will fail to realize opportunities to create sustainable leadership programs and pathways that intentionally prepare leaders, and thereby fail to develop a diverse cadre of

leadership for the coming decades that are appropriately prepared to act as effective agents of change on behalf of children, their families, and the workforce.

Research Questions

To contribute to the development of a theory of leadership, inclusive of the essential experiences and factors that contribute to well prepared and skilled ECE leaders -- those who understand the complex challenges confronting the field, who believe that conditions for children and the workforce who care for and educate them must be improved to one that supports optimal child development, and who possess the skills and commitment to engage with others in the difficult work of changing ECE policies and practices -- and aid in the formation of an articulated pathway to professional leadership in ECE, I propose conducting a qualitative study of intermediary ECE leaders in the United States to establish a portrait of today's leadership and explore the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of today's intermediary ECE leaders (e.g. race/ethnicity, gender, education background, professional background)?
2. What skills and knowledge do intermediary ECE leaders believe are necessary to be an effect agent of change?
    a. How have they gone about developing these skills and knowledge areas for themselves?
    b. In what areas do they need more development?
    c. How confident are they in their capacity to enact change?

3. What formal and informal professional experiences have intermediary ECE leaders had that have contributed to their professional growth and leadership status?
    a. What experiences or opportunities have supported their growth and access to certain leadership roles?
    b. What do they perceive as challenges to their professional growth or hindrances to accessing certain leadership roles?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As this research study is focused on developing a theory of ECE leadership to create effective change agents, this literature review will focus on two distinct areas to describe the state of the field and explore the existing models of leadership which can inform ECE efforts. First, this review will illustrate the current status of quality in the field and the contributing factors as well as the expectations for reform that the field is expected, but not yet prepared to meet. Second, this literature review will explore the ways in which educational leadership has been conceived as change leadership, and the expectations of K-12 educational leaders and the ways in which they are typically prepared for leadership roles. Lastly, drawing upon the changing expectations placed upon ECE leaders, this review will discuss the ways in which ECE can draw upon educational leadership models, and also illustrate the limitations of such models, given the needs and challenges of the ECE system.

The Early Care and Education Challenge

Market factors driving participation and quality.

At present, more American children participate in some form of ECE prior to kindergarten than ever before. This reflects the continuous growth of women into the labor force since World War II, accelerating over the past forty years as the structure of American families has shifted toward increased numbers of single parents and two-parent working families (Bergmann & Helburn, 2002; Zigler & Hall, 1999; Zigler, Marsland, & Lord, 2009). Today nearly two-thirds of women in the labor force have children under the age of six (Bergmann & Helburn, 2002; Zigler et al., 2009), and research reveals that 60% of children under the age of six experience some form early education outside of the

home, with the percentage increasing with the age of the child (Zigler et al., 2009): 40% of infants under the age of one, 59% of two-year olds, and approximately 65% of three-year olds and 75% of four-year olds experience some form of non-parental early care on a regular basis (Barnett, 2008; Zigler et al., 2009).

The soaring participation rates of both women in the labor force and children in early care and education have aided in pushing ECE and its impact on children's learning and development into the attention of the public domain (Barnett, 2008; National Scientific Council of the Developing Child, 2007; Zigler & Hall, 1999). Surprisingly, this push is only a recent development, though as early as 1970 a national child care crisis in which working parents could not access affordable, quality child care was well documented (Zigler et al., 2009). Instead, ECE has mostly languished as what Helburn and Zigler refer to as a "silent crisis" (Zigler et al., 2009), burdening individual families where parents are responsible for the cost of care which they cannot afford (Bergmann & Helburn, 2002; Herzenberg, Price, & Bradley, 2005).

In stark contrast to the public model of education for children in elementary and secondary school where all children have access to free schooling -- albeit fraught with its own challenges -- with few exceptions for a limited number of poor families, the provision of ECE is left to the private market (Polakow, 2007). In fact, the United States is the only western industrialized country that does not provide free, universal access to child care (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006; Polakow, 2007). The cost of early care, for all but the wealthiest families, can account for a substantial percentage of a family's income. It is estimated that the average annual cost for early care of four-year olds is higher than the cost of tuition at a public college

(Shulman, 2000; Zigler et al., 2009) and this cost is double in some cities (Shulman, 2000). These costs have only continued to rise, and are even higher for infant and toddler care, which can account for between seven and 19 percent of the state median income for married couple and exceeds 25 percent of median income for single parents (Child Care Aware, 2013). For low-income families, the cost of care creates an even larger burden, and for many families the average cost of care is wholly out of reach (Bergmann & Helburn, 2002; Shulman, 2000; Zigler et al., 2009) if families are to meet other necessary expenses including shelter and food (Bergmann & Helburn, 2002). Families are forced to make economic choices about ECE, rather than being guided by quality. As a consequence, scores of children are left in poor quality, and at times unsafe settings where, not only are they un-stimulated in the short-run, but their long-term development can be harmed as a result (National Scientific Council of the Developing Child, 2007; Shulman, 2000).

This market-driven model has proved a monumental failure in providing affordable quality ECE, instead producing a system of care that has reduced costs by relying on a poorly compensated, low-skilled, and unstable workforce (Bergmann & Helburn, 2002; Herzenberg et al., 2005; Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009; Zigler et al., 2009). To place early care and education in the reach of families, wages of the workforce are amidst the lowest of any occupation in the United States, falling behind animal trainers and locker room attendants (Zigler et al., 2009) with an average hourly wage reported in 2013 of $10.60 (OPRE, 2013). The ramifications of this are substantial. Research consistently links the poor compensation of early educators to high rates of turnover and the inability to attract new workers, (Bellm & Whitebook,

2004; Cochran, 2007; Whitebook & Sakai, 2004; Zigler et al., 2009). Turnover is reported at close to thirty percent nationally (Zigler et al., 2009), with some states like California demonstrating that turnover is double that of kindergarten teachers (Whitebook et al., 2006). Further, such paltry compensation has been linked to decreasing levels of education and training of the workforce over the past thirty years, the same period during which scores of women entered the workforce (Bellm & Whitebook, 2006; Herzenberg et al., 2005). Taken together, these factors have been correlated with the low levels of quality characterizing most ECE (Bellm & Whitebook, 2004; Shulman, 2000; Whitebook et al., 2006; Whitebook, Kipnis, & Bellm, 2008).

The public role in early care and education.

Federal role.

Public monies, most often driven by the federal government, have been invested in public early care and education in various ways since the 1930's, though it is only in recent history that this has been primarily for the purpose of education. A dichotomy has existed, and still persists today, in which child care has traditionally been seen as a social service or welfare support for low-income families, whereas preschool (commonly referred to as nursery school through the 1980's), has been viewed as an enrichment program for middle and upper income families able to purchase such a service (Ackerman, 2006; Bloch, 1991). Despite extant research which demonstrates the dramatic brain development that happens between birth and age five, and the role of care givers and early educators in fostering development (National Scientific Council of the Developing Child, 2007) coupled with the vast numbers of children participating in early care and education, existing policies reflect deeply held beliefs that ECE is a familial