

Whole Leadership: A Framework for Early Childhood Programs

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Whole Leadership Framework FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS (BIRTH TO THIRD GRADE)



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As the nation addresses the recommendations in the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council's report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*,¹ leadership is emerging as an important component for increasing workforce capacity in early childhood education. Because program leaders are included with other individuals considered to be 'lead educators,' a clear understanding of their foundational knowledge and competencies is necessary for successful implementation. Yet, early childhood leadership is a multi-faceted and nuanced concept that is often clouded by inconsistent standards and policies across an array of program settings.

The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University developed **Whole Leadership**, a clarifying conceptual framework to help address this need. It encompasses a broad view of

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program leadership — evidenced in many areas and collapsed into three domains: **leadership essentials, administrative leadership, and pedagogical leadership.**

Leadership essentials include foundational skills in reflective practice, communication, and relationship building — critical for all facets of leadership and often expressed in leadership styles and dispositions. Administrative leadership involves maximizing team capacity to develop and sustain an early childhood organization with both operational and strategic leadership functions. Program leaders also assume leadership roles beyond their own organizations through advocacy and connecting with their communities.

Pedagogical leadership addresses the complexity of teaching and learning in settings that serve young children, birth through third grade.

DEVELOPING THE WHOLE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

The Whole Leadership Framework was developed through an iterative process by engaging individuals across the country in several ways. Thought leaders at the McCormick Center worked for more than a year to examine the domains of early childhood program leadership and compare their findings to multiple existing standards and structures. They also authored a series of blog posts on the topic — published from February through May of 2016 — intended to solicit responses from the field. Eighty-two individual comments were received that explored various aspects of Whole Leadership and informed the development of the framework. Additional feedback was solicited at the 2016 Leadership Connections™ conference from key national stakeholders serving on the McCormick Center’s Advisory Board and from participants in a featured conference session, video interviews, and written responses to a survey. This important feedback provided a deep and rich exploration of the concepts that led to the Whole Leadership Framework presented in this article.

WHOLE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

The Whole Leadership Framework is designed to clarify our understanding about leadership in early childhood education at the program level. Drawing from Kagan and Bowman’s seminal work, *Leadership in Early Care and Education*,² the framework highlights three primary domains: **leadership essentials, administrative leadership, and pedagogical leadership.** It is important to note that there is overlap between each of these domains, reflecting an interdependent relationship. Few leadership roles and functions are mutually exclusive. Rather, leadership exercised in one domain impacts and/or requires reciprocal leadership in the other domains.

The Whole Leadership Framework can be applied to early childhood programs serving young children in a variety of settings: centers, schools, and homes. Early childhood centers include: Head Start, Early Head Start, state-funded Pre-K, as well as for-profit, non-profit, public, private, employer-sponsored, and

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college-affiliated child care programs. Multi-site organizations have leadership structures with oversight of more than one site. These entities include: corporate child care programs, multi-site Head Start and Early Head Start grantees, and military child care programs. Public and private elementary schools, serving Pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade children, may have leadership roles located at the district or regional levels. The framework is useful when considering the formal and informal leadership structures or roles in each of these settings.

LEADERSHIP ESSENTIALS

Leadership essentials include the personal skills and attributes on which administrative and pedagogical leadership are built. The competencies influence and motivate all other areas of leadership vision and practice. Leadership essentials are embodied by the leader as necessary anchors for success.

Leadership essentials create the fertile and healthy environment that results in a greater degree of collaboration, efficacy, creativity, and ethical commitment for everyone involved, including the leader. In this way, leadership is a shared responsibility and depends on mutual engagement and commitment within the context of trust and communication. Thus, both administrative and pedagogical leadership can be maximized.

The Whole Leadership Framework is anchored by the personal knowledge, skills, and dispositions that foster increasing strength and capacity of everyone in the organization. The vital core dispositions flow from authentic relationships and mutual vulnerability that promote shared empathy and collegiality. Because leadership requires mutual interdependence and influence, it is encompassed within the context of ongoing reflective practice and is strengthened through mutually beneficial dialog among an organization's members. With these foundational competencies, leaders will be able to maximize their leadership influence within an organization as well as expand that influence outward to impact the full early childhood system. The core values and dynamics of interpersonal vitality are indeed leadership essentials needed by all leaders.

ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

Administrative leadership is about setting goals, orchestrating work, and mobilizing people to sustain an early childhood organization. Effective administrative leaders establish systems for consistent implementation of program operations to meet the needs of children, families, and staff. There are at least two important aspects of administrative leadership: **operational leadership and strategic leadership**.

Operational leadership is accomplished through critical functions such as hiring, evaluating, and supporting teaching staff; developing budgets aligned with program goals and needs; and maintaining a positive organizational culture and climate.

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Strategic leadership involves guiding the direction of an early childhood organization with the future in mind. Strategic leaders clarify mission and values, inspire staff to pursue a shared vision, and ensure that program goals and outcomes are attained.

Strategic leadership is not just internally focused. Administrative leaders need to communicate and align their program services with those of other community organizations serving young children and families. Advocacy is another essential aspect of strategic leadership. Effective administrative leaders are future oriented; they engage in advocacy because they want to have influence on the external conditions (professional standards, regulations, and government policies) that impact young children, families, and early childhood programs.

Administrative and pedagogical leadership are separate but connected. For example, the most qualified, skilled teachers will not be effective teaching young children if the organizational conditions in which they work (e.g. supervisor support, opportunities for professional growth, shared decision-making, collegiality, rewards and recognition, role clarity, task orientation, innovativeness, and physical environment) are not adequately supportive. Administrative leadership ensures the organizational conditions in which teachers and other staff can do their best work so that children and families thrive.

PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership exercised to improve the art and science of teaching is found in the pedagogical domain. Our conception of teaching is a broad interpretation — spanning the birth to third grade continuum — that includes activities to optimize child development and learning. Pedagogical leadership attends to educator dispositions and high-quality interactions with children. Activities of individuals exercising pedagogical leadership include ensuring fidelity to curricular philosophy, assessing children’s development and learning, using data for evaluation, and optimizing learning

Pedagogical leadership includes instructional leadership — supporting classroom teachers in implementing curriculum, but we differentiate pedagogical leadership as a broader term that embodies activities that occur in early childhood settings that some individuals may not associate with instruction. For example, some educators may not consider encouraging infant teachers to talk with babies during diapering routines as part of instruction. Therefore, we choose pedagogical leadership as a broader, more inclusive term.

Effective pedagogical leadership requires promoting partnerships with families—essential to children’s learning and growth. Depending on the setting and organizational structure, pedagogical leadership in early childhood programs may also foster family.

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TOOLS FOR WHOLE LEADERSHIP

The Whole Leadership Framework includes key competencies for performing within each domain. Many personal characteristics could have been included as tools, but we chose to select attributes, knowledge, and skills that can be improved through professional development. This focus on application is useful as leaders consider their own skill set and as systems leaders work to improve leadership capacity in our field. As with the primary graphic representation of the framework, there is considerable overlap of competencies across domains. To varying degrees, knowledge and skills necessary for effective administrative leadership have applicability for pedagogical leadership and vice versa. The tools for leadership essentials are foundational for the other domains.

The Whole Leadership Framework is adaptive,³ in that certain organizational characteristics or personal traits may be more highly valued or better suited to meet primary needs at any given time or for specific situations. We believe that all early childhood leaders should have competency in leadership essentials and basic knowledge and skills in both the pedagogical and administrative domains — a balanced leadership perspective. However, depending on the early childhood setting, leadership may be distributed to multiple individuals. A distributed perspective to leadership recognizes that persons in positions of authority choose to share certain leadership functions with others in the organization, both in formal and informal roles.^{4,5} Shared leadership draws upon the collective competence or efficacy of various persons in an organization like administrators, coordinators, teacher leaders, parents, owners, board members, and community leaders, resulting in collective leadership capacity. Collective leadership efficacy can improve teaching practice and workplace climate.^{6,7}

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE USE OF THE WHOLE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

We believe the Whole Leadership Framework can serve as a useful tool for early childhood systems leaders, higher education administrators, training and technical assistance developers, policymakers, and other individuals seeking to improve early childhood leadership and increase capacity of the workforce. We also believe the framework will be useful for individuals working in schools and organizations serving children birth through third grade to help them place leadership functions and competencies in an organized context. Most of all, we hope that it will establish a common language about early childhood organizational leadership as a lever to increase the quality of early childhood programs and to advance the field in support of young children and families.

Endnotes

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