ECE SOLUTIONS

Pathways to Leadership

In "Redefining Leadership: Lessons from an Early Education Leadership Development Initiative,"[1] Professor Anne Douglass shows that a relational and entrepreneurial leadership development program can change the leadership mindset of experienced early educators. This first-of-its-kind study followed 43 early educators as they co-created pathways for change in a new leadership program. The results demonstrate that these early educators, who had an average of 18 years' experience in early childhood education (ECE) but who did not self-identify as leaders, came to see themselves as innovators and influencers within ECE and subsequently increased their contributions to the field.

Relational and Entrepreneurial Leadership

Relational leadership recognizes the expertise or authority of each person within an organization, regardless of formal titles or roles, who exercises leadership at multiple levels.[2] Entrepreneurial leaders are change agents and innovators, who are focused on finding and testing new and better solutions to problems. Entrepreneurial leadership is rarely discussed in the context of ECE, but holds great potential for tapping into the insights, passion, and knowledge of early educators to create new solutions to the persistent challenges of retaining talent and improving quality.[3] Both types of leadership inform this study's definition of leadership, which is a process of influencing positive change to achieve a desired goal or generate a new solution to a problem.[4]

Impact on Early Educators

Early educators experienced transformative shifts in their mindsets about leadership in several key ways. They redefined leadership from something that is hierarchical and formal to a way of being that is highly collaborative, relational, and purpose-driven. Once educators redefined leadership in this way, they connected their new under-standing of leadership with their past and present actions and capabilities. This connection resulted in these educators seeing themselves as leaders, often for the first time. Their relationships with other educators going through the program created professional networks that became powerful sources of support and ideas and reinforced this new understanding of leadership and self-identification as leaders.

Impact on ECE

As educators developed as leaders, they contributed to and improved ECE in several ways. Some pursued doctoral study to advance scholarship in the field. Some sought new positions to make change on a scale greater than that possible in their prior job. Some served in a leadership role on a professional group or advisory board. Some made no changes in their employment but implemented innovative ideas developed from their study to improve quality where they worked. Some pursued entrepreneurial ventures, including the establishment of a mission-specific school.

The Need for Leadership Networks

At present, the ECE field lacks clearly defined and articulated leadership development opportunities and pathways, and little attention has been paid to systematically developing and supporting the leadership of educators to drive improvement.[5] In this study, educators developed their identity as leaders, established supports for their leadership, and took action to lead change in a range of different ways. The results suggest that ECE may benefit from a new way of thinking about a pathway to leadership that looks more like a supported and ongoing developmental process than a one-shot training program that ends without ongoing follow-up and engagement with other leaders. An area for further study may be finding ways to sustain the formal and informal leadership networks that cultivate and nurture leaders from every level of the ECE workforce. Diverse, skilled, and creative leaders from within the field are essential drivers of the transformative change urgently needed in ECE now. The greatest potential for transformative change may lie with ECE's own workforce.

[1] Douglass, A. (2018). Redefining Leadership: Lessons from an Early Education Leadership Development Initiative. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(4), 387–396.

[2] Gittell, J.H. & Douglass, A. (2012). Relational bureaucracy: Structuring reciprocal relationships into roles. *Academy of Management Review*, 37(4), 709-733.

[3] Hess, F. M. (2006). *Educational entrepreneurship: Realities, challenges, possibilities.* Cambridge: Harvard Education Press. Leonard, J. (2013). *Innovation in the schoolhouse: Entrepreneurial leadership in education.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Education. Smith, K. & Petersen, J. L. (2006). What is educational entrepreneurship? In F. M. Hess (Ed.), *Educational entrepreneurship* (pp. 21–44). Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

[4] Douglass, A. (2017). *Leading for change in early care and education: Cultivating leadership from within*. New York: Teachers College Press.

[5] Goffin, S. (2013). *Building capacity through an early education leadership academy.* Retrieved from http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/EELA_Goffin_WEB.pdf.

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