

# Chapter 1

## Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders: Emergence of Relational Leadership

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Effective leadership in early childhood is vital for quality early childhood care and education. There is a need for a comprehensive and coordinated system of early childhood leadership training. To create fiscally sound early childhood programs with learning environments that nurture and challenge young children and with work environments that develop, support, and retain skilled teachers, program directors capable of strong leadership are essential. There is a need to establish policies and pathways to ensure early childhood leaders are well prepared. The purpose of this study was to identify sets of characteristics that are essential for effective early childhood leadership and explore the challenges early childhood leaders encounter in an effort to become effective leaders. Based on the findings, the researcher recommends relational leadership as an essential component of the framework for effective leadership in early childhood education.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

What children experience early on in life has lifelong effects on their development (Rohacek et al., 2010). It is commonly believed that children's education starts at age five when they start kindergarten. But in reality, children's learning starts from birth (Gerber et al., 2010). The early learning for millions of children in the United States is a joint effort between parents and early childhood educators. The children's exposure to a high quality of early childhood education improves their physical and cognitive outcomes (Donoghue, 2017). Barnett and Fredei (2010) suggest, based on their research, the issues that the United States education system is faced with today can be alleviated with universal, effective early childhood programs. They further state that, sadly, most early childhood programs available to children do not fall

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### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

into the high-quality-program category. They are mediocre at best. High-quality early childhood programs are needed to create secure and caring environments for children. They can provide stimulating learning opportunities and experiences that prepare children for the later school years. Multiple researches in the past four decades have confirmed the direct correlation between high-quality early childhood programs and children's future success, which in turn can prevent achievement gaps (O'Keefe, 2017). Perry School Study (Heckman et al., 2010, Schweinhart) and Abecedarian Project (Anderson, 2008, Pungello, Burchinal, Kainz, Wasil & Ramey 2012) are the research studies most commonly referred to for the effects of quality early childhood education and students' future outcome.

There is a need for skilled and committed leaders, to be able to create an environment that supports high-quality learning. Research supports the idea that leadership is the second biggest influence on learning and student outcome after teaching, both in K-12 and early childhood education (Leithwood et al., 2006; Mitgang, 2012, Nettles & Herrington 2007). Whitebook (2010) believes the status quo in early childhood education needs to be transformed to guarantee access to high-quality early childhood education. Strong leadership in early childhood programs is essential, since these individuals are responsible for creating an environment that ensures ideal growth and development of children.

## **BACKGROUND**

This study was an investigation and synthesis of the need in the field of early childhood education for access to well-prepared and effective leaders. There is a need for standards of quality in their professional preparation to promote higher levels of education and reduce inequity and inconsistency, which presently is codified into the nation's early care and education system and leadership requirements. This study was based on the premise that early childhood leadership practices have a direct effect on quality of care in early childhood development. Quality early childhood education is being looked at as a key mechanism to remedy the gap in student achievement and school readiness (Rohacek et al., 2010, Colker & Koralek 2018).

Quality early childhood programs are needed to support school readiness through early language and literature growth and the development of early math skills, cognitive skills, and social-emotional readiness to close the achievement gap in elementary and secondary schools (Heckman, 2011). Unfortunately, the lack of quality programs is an issue (Stebbins & Knitzer, 2007). Regretfully, centers for early care and education are often of poor quality, in short supply, and prohibitively expensive for poor or even middle-class children (Whitebook et al., 2016). Qualified teachers and leaders are instrumental in the operation of high-quality centers for early learning.

There is a need to establish policies and pathways that ensure teachers are well prepared and that program leaders can effectively support them (Whitebook et al., 2018). Only the District of Columbia and New Jersey require center directors to have bachelor's degrees, and no state requires lead teachers in center-based early childhood programs to hold a bachelor's degree (Whitebook et al., 2018). However, increasing degree expectations will not occur until work conditions, particularly the wages earned by early childhood educators and directors, are improved. For instance, Boyd (2013) found that the field of early childhood is dominated by women who are paid low wages and given no benefits. Whitebook et al. (2014) reported that the average hourly pay of preschool teachers was \$15.11, and childcare workers as \$10.33 an hour, which is comparable to fast-food workers and not educated professionals with a bachelor's degree. In summary, quality early childhood education is dependent on qualified and well-trained

**Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders**

teachers and leaders. But early childhood educators cannot be expected to better educate themselves unless pay scale and benefits are improved.

**EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Leadership has been defined in many different ways, and its meaning varies depending on the workplace we are studying. Leithwood and Louis (2012) describe leadership by reference to two core functions: providing direction and exercising influence. Whitebook et al. (2010) see leaders as agents of change—they are defined by what they do, not by their role. Whitebook and her colleagues believe leaders are developed, not born, and leadership can be learned. Leaders possess a combination of skills that can be identified, understood, learned, and practiced (Munoz et al., 2015). According to Fullan (2004), “Nowhere is the focus on the human element more prevalent than in the recent recognition of the importance of strong and effective leadership” (p. 15). He further explains that effective leaders are the key to a large-scale, sustainable education reform. Kivunja (2015) sums it by noting, “There is a repeated pattern in consensus among leaders in educational change literature that leadership plays a role in the structural and cultural dynamics designed for school improvement. Leadership is seen as informational, interpersonal and decisional roles” (p. 1711). There are numerous leadership models that have been developed that work in non-school contexts, and there are some that are specifically developed for use in school settings. Table 1 summarizes leadership models most often used in education (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

*Table 1. Leadership models most often used in education*

Leadership Model	Description
Instructional leadership	focuses on the school's core business – teaching, learning, pupils' progress and achievements
Transformational leadership	is concerned with the commitment of colleagues, leading change, improving performance
Participative leadership	stresses the importance of including colleagues, shared decision-making, and social capital
Distributive leadership	recognizes that there are multiple leaders and that leadership activities are widely shared within and between organizations

As awareness of early childhood education as a public policy priority increases in the United States, there is a stronger need for capable leadership (Abel et al., 2008). Barnett and Fredei (2010) demonstrate the importance of early learning, especially for low socioeconomic families, and how societies around the world are turning attention to the need for high-quality early childhood education. High-quality early childhood education can positively affect learning and development in young children, including gains in achievement, higher high school graduation rates, decreased behavior problems, and decreased crime and delinquency (Barnett & Fredei, 2010). Early childhood leaders must have the knowledge, training, and ability to form sustainable relationships within their environment to effectively lead change. Distributive leadership and instructional leadership are the two most commonly referred to leadership methods in early childhood (Rodd, 2013). But due to complexity of this job, leaders are cautioned that only one leadership approach cannot be appropriate for such a diverse sector. In the past few decades, multiple leadership theories have been introduced that focus on relationships. Relational leadership is

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

one of the newer frameworks that speaks to the quality of relationships that school leaders have with staff, learners, parents, and the community. Even though it is not one of the most commonly referred to leadership styles, due to the nature of early child education and the need for caring leaders, and as an emerging theory from this study, it will be explored in the following section.

## **RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Multiple leadership theories have emerged since the 1970s that have focused on the importance of the relationship between the leader and followers (Marcketti & Kozar, 2007). Komives et al. (2005) believe leadership in today's complex world depends on people developing trusting relationships while working toward a shared goal, and the importance of relationships should not be taken lightly. The transactional and transformational leadership theories are two examples of leadership theories that draw on the importance of relationships. In transformational leadership, both leaders and followers help each other to get to a higher ethical aspiration. Transactional leadership is based on an exchange of valued things. While the idea of relationship-oriented behavior is not a new concept, the formal studies of relational leadership as a framework are surprisingly new. Komives et al. (2013) developed a relational leadership framework and describe this leadership as a process that meaningfully creates an environment that engages leaders and participants and values what the participants have to offer (Marcketti & Kozar, 2007).

Komives et al. (2005) explain that the relational leadership framework is comprised of five components: relational leadership is inclusive of people, is purposeful and creates a common purpose, empowers those involved, is ethical, and recognizes that the four components are accomplished by being process oriented.

Nicholson and Kurucz (2017) believe there is a need to practice relational leadership in order to deal with more urgent and complex social, economic, and environmental issues. They describe the relational leader as one who encourages collaborative capacity; co-creates and co-produces social relationships, community and collective learning; cares for internal and external sustainability issues; enables empathetic response; and assumes the best in others. They further explain relational leadership can be utilized to establish a caring relationship at the social and individual level. A caring, informed approach to relational leadership might positively impact not only individual well-being but also organizational and societal flourishing.

In summary, relational leadership is based on trust and respect. It builds strong relationships with followers, along with mutual accommodation and learning. Accommodating the needs of subordinates is important to the relational leader. This leadership is appropriate for continuous improvement teamwork and allows for diversity and stability among followers. Notable disadvantages of relational leadership are that it is time-consuming, and it relies on long-term relationships between leader and members (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

## **LEADERSHIP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

In recent years, the field of early childhood has been receiving attention nationwide, and the field is enjoying fast growth and new discoveries. But unfortunately, research in early childhood leadership is limited to a relatively small number of researchers (Muijs et al., 2004). As Muijs et al. claim, the field not only is lacking research, but also research in this field is not supported by theories like leadership

***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

in a broader term. Whereas the above section outlined the definition of leadership, in general, and its importance to the field of education, it is helpful to look at what leadership looks like in early childhood development. In contrast to educational leadership, early childhood leadership is still in its infancy, and due to its complexity, early childhood education is not heavily regulated, does not fall under any uniform regulatory agency, and is highly fragmented (Ackerman, 2006). Kivunja (2015) argues that leadership is vital to the success of any educational organization, but it is more essential in early childhood education, because leadership in early childhood centers is responsible for planning, leading, organizing, while also being the visionary, a team stakeholder, a policy designer, and a pedagogy creator. Rodd (2013) believes that, in the field of early childhood education, leadership is not clearly defined, there is limited access to experienced role models and mentors, and there are limited opportunities for leadership preparation. As Bloom and Bella (2005) note, leadership in early childhood education is mostly focused on management issues and day-to-day business activities such as balancing the budget and staffing—but what needs to happen is for the leaders of early childhood to start exploring the position further into broader, more abstract leadership challenges. As leaders, they need to be able to envision goals, motivate staff, set values and promote unity of purpose in their program. According to Rodd (2013), typically leaders of early childhood services are teachers who are promoted to leadership positions (having teaching experience before leadership position is required by some states), and other than standard teacher training, they have few skills for working with adults or the vision to lead their centers forward. As helpful as teacher training and experience can be, it does not offer adequate preparation for the complex leadership and administrative roles and responsibilities required for leading contemporary inclusive, integrated, multi-disciplinary, multi-agency early childhood services (Rodd, 2013). Talan et al. (2014) suggest that early childhood leaders should be goal-oriented and be able to develop a vision for the future with continuous program improvement in mind (Talan et al., 2014). According to Kangas et al. (2016), the key to a high-quality early childhood education is professional leaders who have had extensive education and training. They conclude a capable leader is instrumental to children's short-term and long-term cognitive and social development.

In the 21st century, visionary and ethical leadership is proving to be a critical professional issue for early childhood educators around the world (Rodd, 2013). Leadership continues to be of paramount importance for improving quality service provision for young children and families and for early childhood educators to be recognized as credible professionals with unique expertise that is different from, yet equal to, other professions (Rodd, 2013). Goffin and Washington (2007) speak to the importance of the need for collective problem-solving and accepting shared responsibility in the field in order to create an agreeable answer to the question of what defines and sets the boundaries for the early care and education field.

A noticeable issue in the field is the lack of education and experience of the leaders in the field of early childhood education. Whitebook et al. (2010), in their research on early childhood leadership, found that less than 25% of participants in their study with a college degree reported the degree was completed in early childhood education or child development, mostly due to lack of universities offering the degree.

In early childhood education, effective leadership plays a very important role in building and maintaining a high-quality early learning environment. Sheridan et al. (2009) focus on the importance of knowledge, skills, and practices of early childhood educators in relation to how much young children are learning and how they are being prepared for elementary school. Bella and Bloom (2003) explain that, even though the importance of strong leadership in early childhood education is commonly agreed

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

upon, the majority of center directors assume their leadership positions without prior preservice management training.

It is paramount to note, research increasingly suggests that directors' level of formal education is a strong predictor of overall program quality (Ackerman & Sansanelli, 2010). Muijs et al. (2004) have similarly found leadership to be an important factor in the quality of early childhood education. They conclude that a strong leader will facilitate a language-rich environment, sensitive teachers, child-focused communication with the child's family, higher levels of teacher education, and lower staff turnover. In early childhood organizations, strong leadership is particularly critical, because center directors are the gatekeepers to quality. Center directors have multiple responsibilities to create a climate that promotes growth and development of children as well as creating a system to ensure the quality of education.

Bloom et al. (2013) explain, "Ensuring higher quality at the programmatic and systems level in early education reform necessitates visionary and skilled leadership" (p. 16). An early childhood leader could be facing the leadership of a for-profit or nonprofit program, half-day or full-day services, independent, agency affiliated, faith based, or corporate sponsored. Regardless of the type of organization that is being administered, four trends affect the job of a leader in early childhood education: the emphasis on quality and accountability, federal and state legislation, heightened competition for qualified education into broader social service, and greater competition for financial resources (Bella & Bloom, 2003).

Increasing complexity of the external environment has elevated the need for strong leadership in the director's role. A high-quality early childhood program is directly linked to the action of the director. There is a growing demand for an early childhood leader who is interested in the art and science of leadership (Bloom, 2003). An effective center director has to be an instructional leader and ensure a quality curriculum is implemented and be a leader who can meet the needs of young children and their parents. This person is someone who can play the role of a financial manager, making sure enough money is generated and a proper marketing program is in place. This person needs to be able to deal with vendors for educational supplies, accounting firms, attorneys, and banks and regulatory agencies, just to name a few (Bloom, 2003).

The role of the early childhood leader is complex and requires specialized training and expertise in addition to a solid grounding in child development knowledge and best practices in early childhood education (Ong & McLean, 2015). In their research, Muijs et al. (2004) point to the importance of leadership in early childhood education. They stress the need for more specific training and professional development and put emphasis on the complexity of the role. They believe the leadership position is complex because of its diversity and scale but also because of the strong advocacy and community roles required of leaders in early childhood. It is not a secret that the role of teachers for program quality is pivotal, but in order to make sure there is high quality at the programmatic and system levels, visionary and skilled leadership is necessary (Goffin & Washington, 2007).

### **ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN PREPARING EFFECTIVE LEADERS**

Rodd (2013), in her book *Leadership in Early Childhood*, states that research confirms that, when early childhood leaders are appropriately prepared and skilled, they will be more equipped to support children and be assets to parents, and they will be able to provide better quality care.

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

There is a growing need for early childhood education leadership development, but the majority of early childhood education leadership literature and programs remain focused on management and administration. Sheridan et al. (2009) explain that, in recent years, accountability has grown, but resources for professional support have not kept pace with the need. Bloom and Bella (2005) note that, while there appears to be common agreement among practitioners and policymakers of the urgent need for strong early childhood leadership programs, only a handful of states have made leadership training a priority. In a survey of early childhood education leadership, Goffin (2013) reports, out of 55 self-reported early childhood education leadership development programs, only one program (University of Kentucky's Educational Leadership Studies graduate program) described itself as a program designed for individuals aiming for leadership positions in organizations that serve young children.

Unfortunately, literature on professional development in early childhood leadership is very limited. Sheridan et al. (2009) are concerned with the fact that, even though there are different theories and practices being experimented in leadership development in early childhood, it is unfortunate that the discussions on early childhood development practices or lessons learned are not documented sufficiently in publications. Researchers suggest that leaders attain higher degrees of self-efficacy with more professional development. It not only helps the leader to be more competent but also creates an environment that is more productive and positive for staff (Talan et al., 2014). Bloom and Bella (2005) believe that leadership starts in the mind, and it is important how the leaders think about themselves and believe in themselves and their professional interaction. They use their data from their research in 2003 to confirm that "heightened feeling of self-efficacy has been sustained, empowering leadership participants to assume new challenges they might otherwise not have had the confidence to take on" (p. 33). Epstein and Willhite (2015) define educator efficacy as the belief educators have in their ability to influence children's learning. They believe efficacy includes educator confidence in instructional and management skills. They conducted a pilot study where an experienced educator mentored and shared knowledge with a teacher candidate for over 100 hours. The result was strong efficacy across instructional and management aspects.

McLean et al. (2016) argue that lower standards for early childhood educators compared with those teaching older children cause us to believe that early learning is less valuable and requires less skills to teach. This could be a contributing factor in lower levels of investment in early childhood education. Most states do not require a degree for early childhood leaders. In turn, early childhood professional development can take many other forms: formal education, coaching or consultative interaction, study groups provided by local governmental agencies, or specialized on-the-job training, which is probably the most common form. Sheridan et al. (2009) describe the specialized training as in-service training, which can include training specific to early childhood that takes place outside of a formal education system, such as in-service presentation, web-based lectures, or conferences. Coaching and consultation in this field are more of a collaborative and voluntary partnership when the educators learn from each other (Sheridan et al., 2009).

Historically, the studies and research that have been conducted on classroom quality and the qualifications of and expertise of childcare directors have concluded that better-educated leaders positively influence both short- and long-term learning of children. But there is limited study investigating and questioning early childhood directors' leadership approach at work (Muijs et al., 2004). Unfortunately, a limited number of colleges offer programs that are focused on developing leaders who understand the broader context of the early childhood education system. In general, there is limited attention given to leadership teaching beyond managerial skills. This lack of attention might be the result of a lack of data

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

available to constitute the growing population of the leaders in roles outside of direct early childhood education settings (Whitebook et al., 2012).

Whitebook et al. (2010) conclude from their study that the professional development needs of early childhood program leaders are very apparent. They suggest that administrators and policy makers should respond to these short-term and long-term needs by implementing the needed programs. Because some of these leaders come from outside of the field, professional development should not only include policy and general administration issues, but also early childhood content. Whitebook et al. recommend that it is also very important that institutions of higher education and professional development programs in early childhood pay close attention to our diverse culture and adjust their trainings to the needs of our linguistically and culturally diverse population.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

It was the goal of this study to contribute to the understanding of effective leadership in the field of early childhood education. The significance of this study is that it identified the essential dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed for effective early childhood leadership, which may be used in the design and implementation of leadership development programs for early childhood leaders.

More skilled leaders are instrumental in establishing quality care programs that guarantee higher learning for children (Leithwood et al., 2006; Mitgang, 2012). High-quality early childhood education plays an important role in the future achievement of children. High-quality early childhood learning benefits all young children, particularly children from low-income households with the greatest challenges to developing readiness to learn (Whitebook, 2010). This researcher has sought to study the important characteristics of effective early childhood education leaders and challenges they are facing in an effort to theorize essential characteristics needed to aid in understanding effective early childhood leaders.

The purpose of this study was to identify sets of characteristics that are essential for effective early childhood leadership and explore the challenges early childhood leaders encounter in an effort to become effective leaders. The researcher interviewed individuals and collected experiences and knowledge of experts and those who understand the complex challenges in the field to address the professional development needs of early childhood educators. The field of early childhood education desperately needs a pathway and systemized set of competencies to prepare the field's leadership.

In this study, multiple different terms were used to describe early childhood leadership positions. Early childhood leadership is often referred to as director or administrator, which includes the individual responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating a childcare, preschool, or kindergarten program. The role covers both leadership and management functions. The leadership functions relate to the broad plan of organization, clarifying and affirming values, setting goals, articulating a vision, and charting a course of action to achieve the vision. Their managerial functions relate to the actual orchestration of tasks and the setting up of a system to carry out the organization's mission (Click & Karkos, 2013). It was the goal of this researcher to seek to answer the following questions.

1. What are the characteristics of an effective early childhood leader?
2. What challenges do early childhood leaders encounter in an effort to become effective leaders?



## ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

### **Theoretical Framework**

Early childhood leadership is a multi-faceted concept with inconsistent standards and policies within many different types of program settings. The demands facing early childhood education today have prompted leading early childhood education scholars, advocates, and policy makers to call for new ways of thinking about the field, its mission, and new models of leadership. According to Goffin and Washington (2007), the field of early childhood education requires an understanding of leadership that moves beyond administration and management to focus on building a comprehensive, coherent, and high-quality early childhood education system. The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership proposes a Whole Leadership Framework, based on the complexity and vast array of responsibilities of early childhood education leaders. Whole Leadership is a conceptual framework that follows three leadership domains: leadership essentials, administrative leadership, and pedagogical leadership (Abel et al., 2017). In most leadership roles, regardless of the type of organization, there is usually overlap of functions and responsibilities. The Whole Leadership Framework is not an exception; there are some overlaps between each of the leadership domains. Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between the three domains.

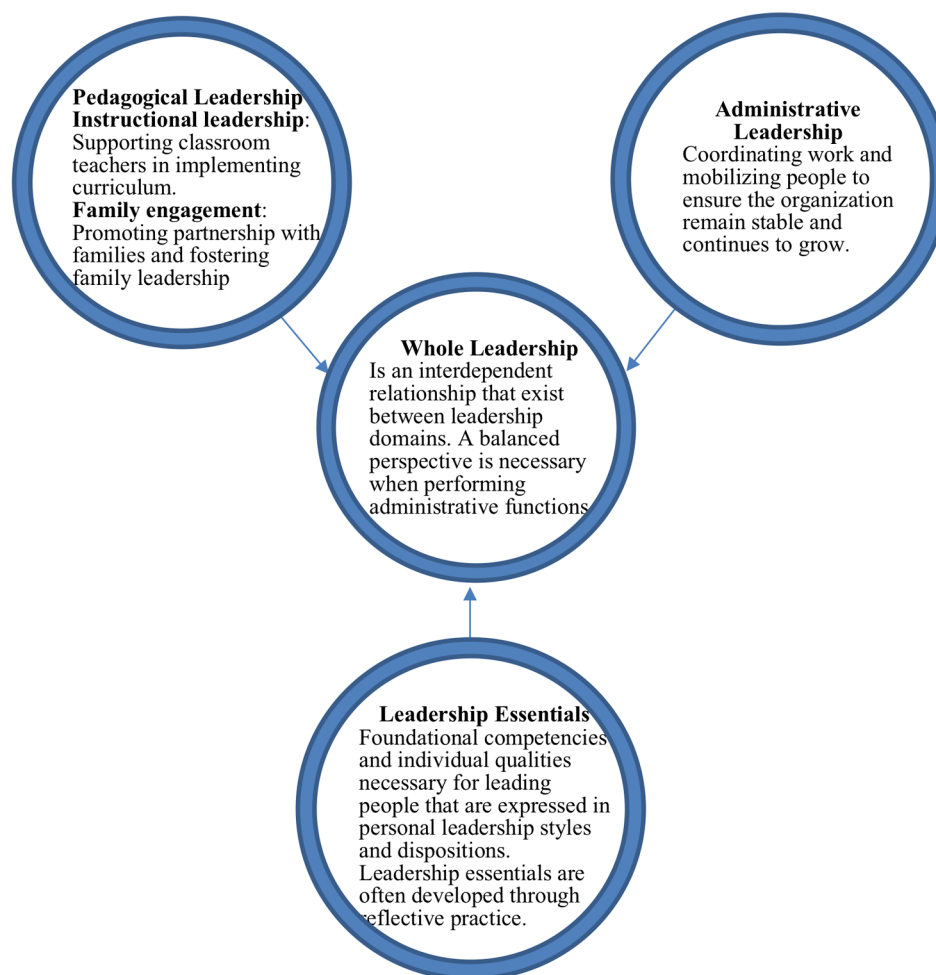
Abel et al. (2017) explain the three domains as follows: first, leadership essentials as the personal skills and attributes of leaders. Administrative and pedagogical leadership are built on essential leadership. Leadership essentials create a healthy environment that results in a greater degree of collaboration, efficacy, creativity, and ethical commitment for everyone involved, including the leader.

Second, administrative leadership is about setting goals, orchestrating work, and assigning employees to specific tasks (Abel et al., 2017). There are two separate aspects to this leadership: operational and strategic leadership. There are specific tasks expected from an operational leader such as hiring, evaluating, and supporting teaching staff, developing a budget that meets goals and needs of school, and making sure positive culture and climate of center is maintained (Abel et al., 2017).

Last, the responsibility of the pedagogical leader is to improve the science of teaching and improve and optimize child development and learning. This leader is faced with the challenge of ensuring fidelity to curricular philosophy, assessing children's development and learning, using data for evaluation, and optimizing learning (Abel et al., 2017). Pedagogical leadership is instructional leadership with some added responsibilities. Pedagogical leadership is a broader term in early childhood education that embodies activities that occur in an early childhood setting that some people may not associate with instruction (Abel et al., 2017). For instance, an effective pedagogical leader will create a partnership with families, which is instrumental to children's learning and growth (Abel et al., 2017).

### **Methodology**

The goal of the researcher in this study was to identify not only the set of characteristics effective early childhood leaders need to possess, but also the challenges these leaders encounter. In this qualitative study, grounded theory approach was used, and the general orientation of the work was provided by the constructivist interpretive perspective. This approach was used because existing research is limited in the field, and it was the hope of the researcher to be able to help build a new theory around the phenomenon being studied. Constructivist grounded theory was also a preferred method because it presents a single, systematic, and unified method to analyze the data. Charmaz (2006) explains one of the major strengths of grounded theory is that it suggests tools for the researcher to help with analyzing processes.

**Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***Figure 1. Whole leadership framework (Abel et al., 2017)*

The researcher appreciated the fact that this methodology offers a degree of flexibility not only in the selection of samples and the data analysis, but also for investigation of topics with limited research. Overall, the philosophical cornerstone of constructivist grounded theory and the methodological processes explained by Charmaz fit with the research questions, the goals of this research, and the personal views of the researcher.

## Setting

There is a dire need for understanding the knowledge and behaviors required for early childhood leaders to empower teachers and facilitate operation of quality early childhood programs. Because this issue is not isolated to a region or state, the researcher extended her investigation to multiple states. In this study, the researcher focused on eight experts in the field of early childhood development. These individuals were from eastern, midwestern, and western states. The researcher sought individuals with expertise in advocating for young children and managing and supporting bipartisan policies for early childhood

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

education success—individuals with experience in conducting research, training, and consultation for local and state initiatives on early childhood leadership; authors with multiple books and scholarly publications; an early childhood education college professor and dean of a college of education with a degree program offered in early childhood education and early childhood leadership training. Selection of these individuals was solely based on their knowledge, reputation, and contribution to the field of early childhood education and not their geographic location or gender.

### **Data Sources**

The researcher initially used purposeful sampling, which used an assumption that the researcher was interested in discovering, understanding, and gaining insight on the phenomenon and consequently had to select individuals she could learn from the most (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In grounded theory, variation within the sample is crucial; there is a boundary between initial purposive sampling and theoretical sampling, as theories emerged (Heath, 2007). The researcher first set selection criteria for the individuals she was intending to interview. The first two participants were selected based on their experience and background—one was active in advocating for new policies in early childhood, and the other was a scholar in the field. The other participants were invited to join the study as data were coded and the research necessitated their expertise. Two of the participants were recommended by other participants due to their contributions to the field of early childhood education.

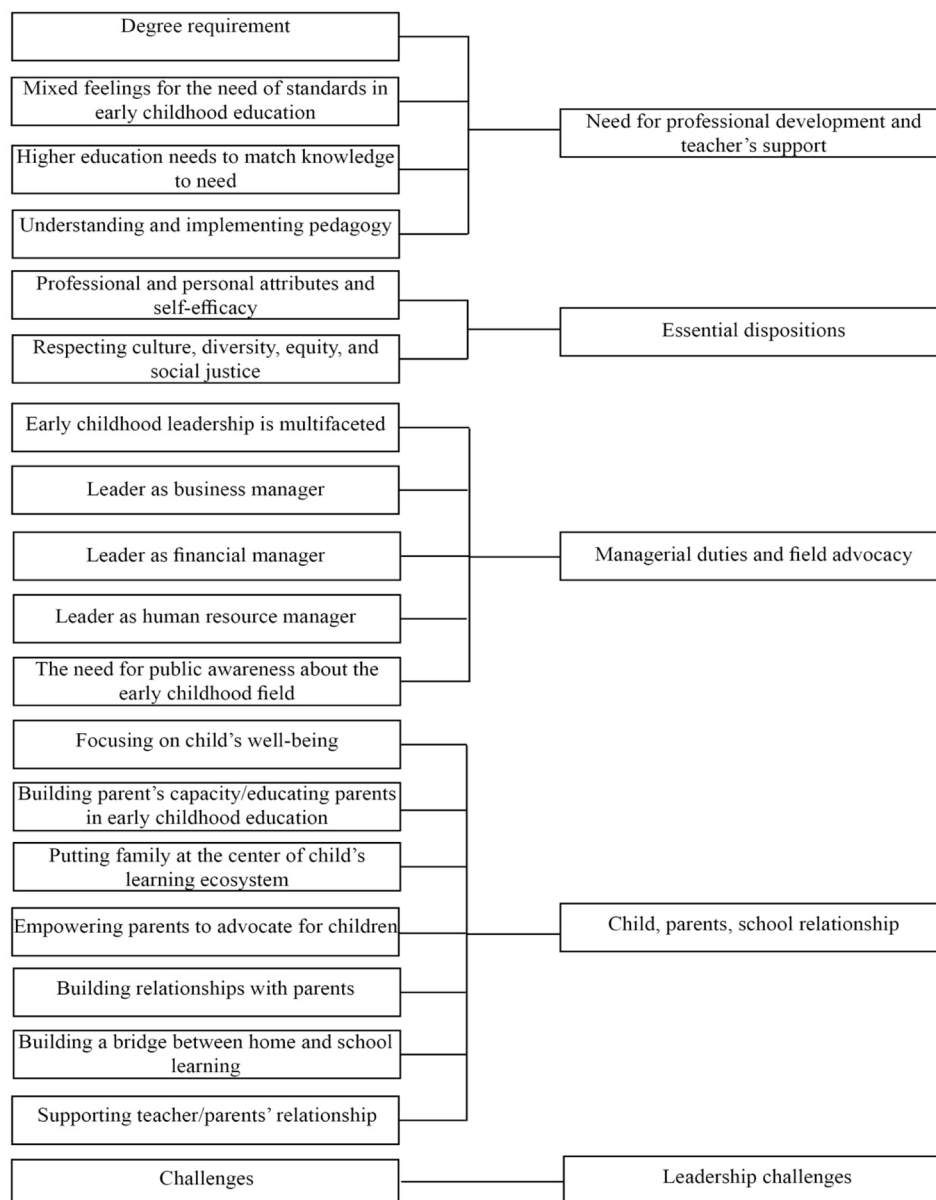
### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Potential participants were contacted via email and invited to participate. Some of the interviews were conducted in person and some via Zoom video conferencing. There was a need for a follow-up discussion with some participants. The researcher did not observe a difference in quality of collecting data between the two methods of in-person interviews and video conferencing.

As the primary data collector and the individual analyzing the data, the researcher started studying the phenomenon, assuming a primary stance and deriving meaning from the data. As the theory was emerging from one interview, the researcher would choose who to interview next based on his/her expertise in the field and the theory that was emerging. The interviews were semi-structured, and the researcher wrote memos about what was encountered after each interview, not only about her perceptions, but also about what she had learned from the interview. The data was coded in multiple levels and categorized.

## **FINDINGS**

The two research questions—what are the characteristics of an effective early childhood leader, and what challenges do early childhood leaders encounter in an effort to become effective leaders?—were used as a guide as codes were turning in to categories. As the data were categorized, certain codes had overriding significance, and there were some common themes and patterns in several codes. As the researcher proceeded with categorizing the data, the conceptual level of analysis raised from description to a more theoretical level. The researcher then defined the properties of the categories and their relation to other categories. Figure 2 is the demonstration of defined categories and the relationships between them.

**Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***Figure 2. Defined categories and their relationships*

The 19 categories that emerged were presented and were discussed in five groups: need for professional development and teachers' support; essential dispositions; managerial duties and field advocacy; child, parent, and school relationships; and leadership challenges.

Based on the theory that emerged, the researcher is proposing to remove family engagement as a component of the pedagogical leadership domain from the Whole Leadership Framework. She recommends the addition of a fourth domain to the Whole Leadership Framework, relational leadership. This domain draws from the child, parent, and school relationship that consisted of seven categories focusing on the child's well-being, building parents' capacity/educating parents in early childhood education, put-

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

ting family at the center of the child's learning ecosystem, empowering parents to advocate for children, building relationships with parents, building a bridge between home and school learning, and supporting teachers'/parents' relationship.

Relational leadership focuses on the nature of relationships that are built between the leader and the organization one is leading. Data supported the need for attention to building strong relationships between child, parent, and educators in the early childhood setting. Relationships affect many aspects of a child's developmental, social, emotional, intellectual, behavioral, and physical development. Caring relationships facilitate a sense of connection between the child, parent, and educators and are a foundational component in early childhood programs. The researcher draws from the ethic of care theory to support the need for the addition of relational leadership as the fourth domain.

Understanding and implementing pedagogy is the category that emerged from this study and supports instructional leadership as one of the components of this domain. But the findings extensively support parent, leader, and school relationships, and, as one participant noted, engagement alone is not sufficient. Therefore, family engagement as a sub-category of this domain is inadequate. The extent of the relationship that is required between the parent, leader, and school makes it vital to put higher emphasis on the five categories that emerged as the role of parents and their relationships with leaders. The researcher proposes removing family engagement from this domain and adding the fourth domain to the framework of relational leadership.

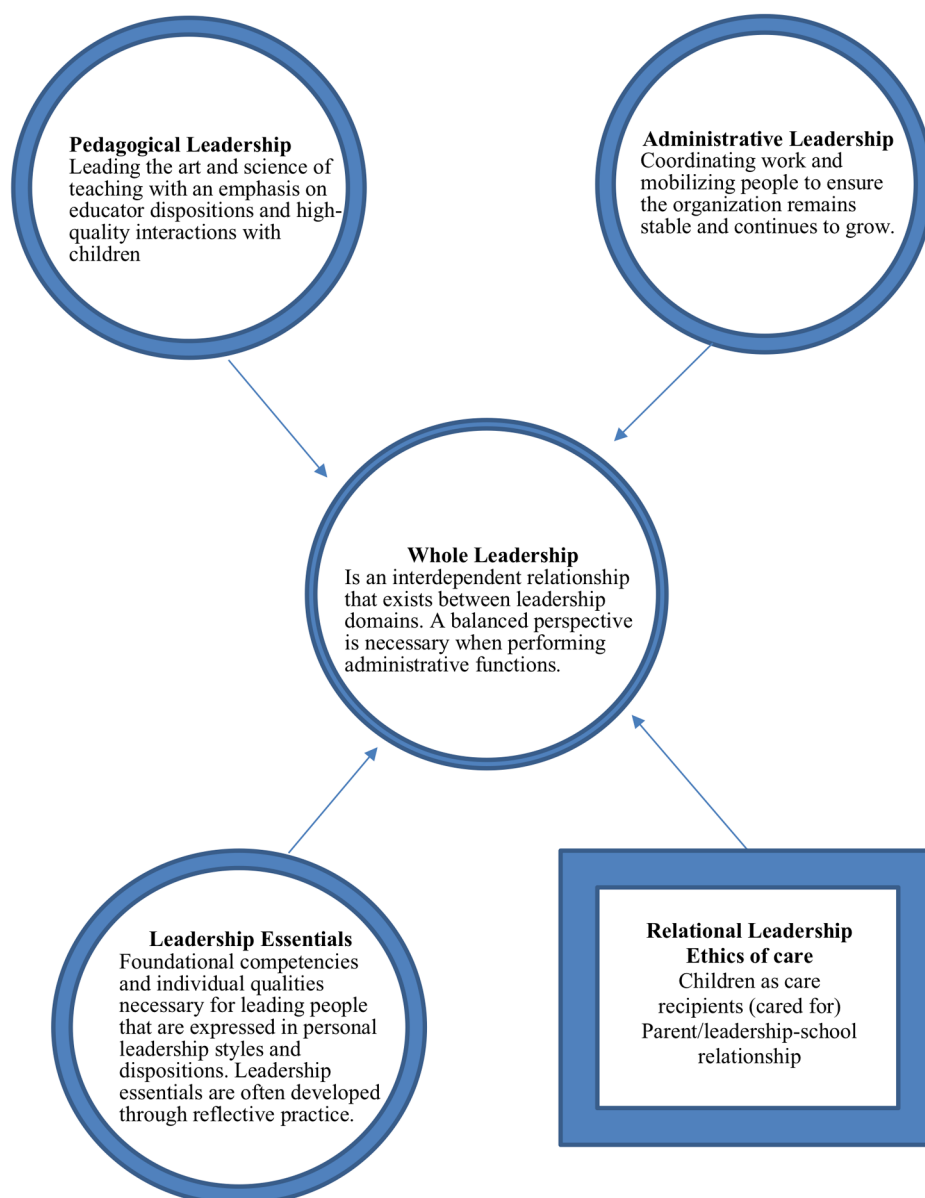
## **DISCUSSION**

### **Emergent Theory**

As the researcher investigated the two research questions of the essential characteristics of an effective early childhood leader and the challenges of this role, she collected and analyzed data. At the conclusion of the data analysis, a theory that was grounded in the data emerged. The child's well-being category and the six categories related to the role of parents and its relation to leadership were among the categories that emerged. Building parents' capacity/educating parents in early childhood education, putting family at the center of child's learning ecosystem, empowering parents to advocate for children, building relationship with parents, building a bridge between home and school learning, and supporting teacher/parents relationships were the emerging categories that fall under role of parents and its relation to leadership. The researcher theorized that, because of the nature of early childhood education and the developmental stage of the children and based on the research presented, ethics of care theory should be an integral part of the Whole Leadership Framework. The researcher further suggests two components to this theory, child as the care recipient (cared for), drawn from the child well-being category, and parent-leadership-school relationship based on six components of parents' role in early childhood education. The fourth domain and its components will be discussed in detail in the subsequent section. Figure 3 demonstrates the proposed whole leadership framework, including the fourth domain.

### **Relational Leadership**

Relational leadership is one of multiple theories of leadership that have been developed in recent years. According to Burnier (2003), Mary Parker Follet, a political scientist from the early 20th century, is the

**Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***Figure 3. Modified whole leadership framework*

pioneer of the theory. She believed in the care perspective of leadership. She encouraged administrators to learn from their subordinates and their community. This leader focuses on the nature of the relationships that are built between the leader and the organization she is leading. A relationship-based approach would focus on the complemented relationship between the leader and the follower. This approach relies on respect, trust, and mutual obligation that generates influence between parties. It will foster a strong relationship between the leadership and followers. The advantage of this approach is that it accommodates differing needs of subordinates. But it can be time consuming since it relies on building relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

Marcketti and Kozar (2007) explain the five components of this theory as inclusiveness, empowerment, purposefulness, ethic, and process. Inclusiveness as the first component is defined as understanding, actively engaging diversity in views, approaches, styles, and valuing. The relational leader values the variations and differences among participants. Inclusiveness requires individual members to contribute their talent to achieve the group goal. The second component is empowerment. This component includes the sense of self and set of environmental conditions that encourages the full involvement of participants. Empowering can occur through sharing of information and knowledge; rewarding, directing, and inspiring; providing resources; mentoring relationships; creating processes and policies; and claiming power for self-fulfillment. Third component is purposefulness, which indicates commitment to goals and being purposeful to the group's vision. The fourth component emphasizes ethical and moral leadership. It is driven by standards and values that are naturally moral. The last component is process, which refers to how to be a group and stay as a group.

The relational leadership puts on emphasis on moral and ethical leadership and how leaders are in relation to others. The leader looks at communication as a way of working out what is meaningful and believe in talking with people, which means all views are shared and considered (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Denis et al. (2012) describe relational leadership as participation and collectively creating a sense of direction. Uhl-Bien (2006) explains that relational leadership theory is defined as an overarching framework to study leadership as a process that influences social behavior. Its practices are socially constructed through relational and social process.

It is the belief of the researcher that leadership in early childhood education should be relational. It focuses on social processes and not on individual actions of the leader. As discussed in the preceding section, concepts such as empowering, ethics, vision, and care are integrated into this theory. Ciulla (2009) defines care as attention to what is going on in the world and emotional concern about the well-being of others. In the world of early childhood education, the world can be the individual centers for early childhood programs, and others are the children who are cared for. Relational leadership was proposed by the researcher as the fourth domain of the Whole Leadership Framework. Relational leadership includes ethics of care theory with two components, children as care recipients and the parent-leadership-school relationship.

### **Ethics of Care**

Learning to love and nurture each other comes to mind when one thinks about the act of caring. Noddings (2015) defines a caring relation as a connection or encounter between two human beings. In this relation, both parties have to contribute something to the relation, or caring will not occur. She developed the idea of care as a feminine ethic and applied it to the practice of moral education (Noddings, 1984).

Pettersen (2011) gives his perspective of Noddings' ethics of care: "With an alternative moral ontology, where the starting point is human connectedness and interdependency as it is in an ethics of care, the welfare and growth of one individual is seen as intertwined with the flourishing of others" (p. 5). Noddings (2012) explains human existence starts in a relationship, and through relationships, the human individual emerges. In a caring relationship, one party acts as carer and the other as cared-for. The carer should display qualities that have been referred to "engrossment" and "motivational displacement," and the person receiving care should display some sort of response to caring (Noddings, 1984). A caring relationship happens when one accepts responsibility and sees to the needs of others. It is a view that sees persons as relational and interdependent. In Noddings' ethics of care, emotion plays a big role.

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

For the act of caring to happen in school, it is the responsibility of the educator to create an environment to support the act of caring. When the connection is broken, the caring ceases to exist. This type of broken connection is often seen in teacher-student relationships where one refuses to acknowledge the other. Noddings explains that caring in the classroom is not only about teacher caring about students, but also about helping student to learn to develop a caring relationship with others, including learning (Noddings, 2015). She sees reciprocal, egalitarian, openness, honesty, fairness, collaboration, and reflection as the characteristics that are needed for a school to be built on care (Noddings, 2015). Educators should create a climate where caring can flourish. She believes care is a binding thread for all curricula in a global and democratic society. Noddings (2007) imagines that, “If we could consider putting care in a prominent place within and throughout the curriculum, then the benefit to students and teachers would be real and meaningful” (p. 173). In fact, she suggests that education “should be organized around themes of care rather than traditional disciplines and based in a general education that guides the students in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals and the environment, the human-made world, and ideas” (p. 173).

Noddings (1984) believes that, when one enters the teaching profession, one knows that one is entering into a profession that will be engaged in a very special relationship. She further explains that caring for the other is part of art of teaching: “As teacher, I am, first, one-caring” (p. 176).

### **Ethics of Care in Early Childhood Education**

The architecture of the brain is most open to the influence of experiences and relationships during early childhood. Shonkoff et al. (2016) explain that children’s development starts in an environment of relationship. Many people play important roles in a child’s life in the early stages of development. Besides family, extended family, early childhood educators, nurses, and more touch their lives. These relationships affect many aspects of their development—social, emotional, intellectual, behavioral, and physical. The quality of care in early life will lay the foundation that supports later outcomes.

Caring for others has been studied by different disciplines of science and social sciences. Swick (2007) states that he has been interested and has studied the process of caring for many years. His special interest is in how caring transforms teacher-child interactions into intimate, empowering relations. He suggests that there are five themes that give insight into the value of caring for families and early childhood educators: the meaning of caring, the power of caring, families as caring environment, early childhood educators and caring, and strategies for caring communities. In terms of early childhood professionals and caring, he describes early childhood educators as the extension of the families’ caring and nurturing. He suggests four effective approaches: first, modeling. Setting an example is the most powerful teaching strategy. As the ones who care for children, early childhood educators set the tone for them to be caring adults. Second, educating about caring helps parents and children develop caring behavior. Third, supporting is the core of what early childhood educators do. Bonding with families is the basis for establishing quality caring. Last is empowering parents by creating possibilities where early childhood educators and families can engage in mutually respectful relationships.

The researcher believes the keystone of educating is the relationship that is developed with the child. In her view, this notion is even more vital in the early childhood setting, since young children need consistent, nurturing relationships. Scientifically, it is proven that children need sensitive care and nurturing to be able to build capacity for love, compassion, empathy, and trust. The researcher believes that, when there is caring, nurturing, and supportive interaction with young children, their growth and development



***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

are ensured. Caring behavior modeled by educators will create a caring foundation for children as they grow to adulthood. Caring facilitates a sense of connection from which springs countless opportunities for learning. She believes building a caring relationship is a foundational component in teaching and caring in early childhood programs. Young children are impressionable and thrive in the context of caring and dependable relationships. It is imperative to have a positive child-teacher relationship built on trust, care, and understanding, which will bear the fruit of children's cooperation and motivation and will increase the chances of higher outcomes. The researcher suggests that, to build a positive relationship with young children, educators need to invest in the attention and time they are giving to the child. Listening to the children's needs at this stage of development is far more beneficial than children coloring pictures or practicing the alphabet. This will promote a trusting relationship and will reduce challenging behavior, as young children are known to seek attention, regardless of whether the attention is positive or negative. Another component of building a caring and positive relationship is getting to know the child, their interests, background, culture, and preferences. And, most importantly, a positive, caring relationship is based on love. Any individual who has had the privilege of working with children in an early childhood education program can attest that the love that children give you is unconditional. In fact, it is the firm belief of the researcher that this is probably the number-one contributor for most people staying in this field regardless of the low pay, long hours, and low respect for the profession. A saving account is a metaphor that has been used in relation to love and positive relationship. Educators need to understand that, even though most of them are in this profession for the love of children, unless we show how much we love and care for them, the balance of the savings account will soon get depleted. As was presented before, constructive grounded theory allows the researcher's paradigmatic orientation to be derived by reasoning from self-evident propositions to the research project and encourages use of reflexivity by the researcher during the research process (Charmaz, 2014). According to Charmaz (2006), "We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practice" (p. 10).

Based on the data that were collected and analyzed and the theory that emerged—caring and building a positive relationship with children is an essential part of early childhood care and education. It is the belief of this researcher that there is an absolute need for administrative leadership to make sure the center for early childhood education remains stable and continues to grow. There is no question that any center for education cannot prosper without pedagogical leadership to support classroom teachers in implementing curriculum. The need for leadership is essential and cannot be denied, as it sets the stage for competencies needed by an individual to lead people. But the researcher, relying on this study, suggests that an important component of leadership for early childhood education is relational leadership. Children's well-being and welfare should be a vital part of the framework. Ethics of care is proposed as an aspect of relational leadership. Children as care recipients is one of the components of ethics of care. The second component of ethics of care, as proposed by the researcher, is the parent-leader-school relationship.

In relationships with parent, school, and student success, multiple terms have been used in the field of education, such as parent-school involvement, engagement, and partnership. As each term will briefly be discussed, it is the belief of this researcher that the above terms, based on research and implementation, seem to fit the K-12 setting. Due to the nature of young children's needs, the privilege of having more one-on-one interaction with parents in early childhood education, and more openness of parents to learn about early childhood education and being part of the children's learning ecosystem, the term relationship seems more fitting.

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

## **Parent-School Involvement, Engagement, or Relationship?**

There are enormous amounts of studies and research on how parent partnerships with the school positively impact student success. Schools have realized they cannot educate students without the help of parents. It goes without saying that parents are children's first teachers. They have the responsibility to have a healthy relationship with their child, be a role model, and provide guidance. This could lead to collaboration with schools later and forming a partnership. The philosophy of partnership has moved beyond mothers volunteering at school dances, chaperoning, and fundraising. The new model is more inclusive and not only includes mothers and fathers, but has also extended to grandparents, other family members, caregivers, and even community groups.

In recent years, increasing importance has been put on the role of parents in the child's education. There have been several scholarly papers and models introduced. But what is best for the child: parent-school involvement, engagement, or relationship? There seems to be some confusion with the first two terms in K-12, as some people see them as the same, and some see them quite differently. The researcher tends to agree with the latter. The following section will discuss the first two terms, as they have been the subject of discussions in the education arena, but then will introduce the parent-school relationship as it seems more fit for early childhood education and as it is supported as the emerging theory of this study.

### **Parent-School Involvement**

The researcher believes that, when schools are asking for parent involvement, they are expected to get involved with tasks that have been pre-selected for them. Ferlazzo (2011) tells us that schools that encourage family involvement have their goals, projects, and needs identified and tell parents how they can get involved and help. This in no way suggests family involvement is bad. As was discussed earlier, research shows that any kind of increased family support of students will increase their chances of success. Goodall and Montgomery (2013) referred to the dictionary definition of involvement as "the act of taking part in an activity or event, or situation." They explained that involvement does not seem to have a feeling of ownership, and it tends to encourage to be part of an activity. Family involvement is easier to implement, and with the desire to increase student test scores and the promise that family involvement will have a positive impact on student achievement, it can be very tempting (Ferlazzo, 2011). Family involvement seems to be doing more of mechanical tasks at school, like showing up for a meeting or attending a book drive. Neither one of these activities will cognitively challenge the child. The No Child Left Behind Act relied strongly on parents' involvement. The law required that Title I school districts have parental involvement in writing and had funding tied to parent involvement (LaRocque et al., 2011). Ferlazzo (2011) explains some school districts were even willing to pay parents to get involved. But having a set duty to do and even get paid to perform a task may only work short term and is not for the good of the child.

### **Parent Engagement**

Ferlazzo (2011) and Goodall and Montgomery (2013) see parent engagement as a better way of inviting parents to school and being part of their child's learning. Goodall and Montgomery state there is more parental commitment and ownership when parents are engaged. The researcher believes that, when schools invite parents to be engaged, in fact they are inviting them to be an integral part of leadership,

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

where their visions and goals matter. Because a sense of belonging is created in family engagement, there is a higher possibility that engaged parents will encourage other parents to consider contributing their own vision. When that sense of collaboration is created, the children will win. Ferlazzo explains that schools that are looking to engage families tend to listen to what parents are thinking, dreaming, and worrying about. With family engagement, the goal is not to serve clients but to gain partners. In fact, in recent years, the terms engagement and partnership have been used interchangeably, and family-school partnership seems to be the more preferred term in recent years. This partnership supports students' learning, strengthens families and neighborhoods, and improves schools. Mapp and Kuttner (2013) note, "For schools and districts across the U.S., family engagement is rapidly shifting from a low-priority recommendation to an integral part of education reform efforts" (p. 5). They further explain that family-school partnership policies are backed by 50 years of research and link the parents' role as "supporters of learning, encouragers of grit and determination, models of lifelong learning, and advocates of proper programming and placements for their child" (p. 5)—and students' beliefs about the importance of education. Unfortunately, policies and reforms often lack the understanding that, just because a phenomenon is backed by research, it does not necessarily mean the skills, knowledge, and acceptance are possessed by the parties that are affected and benefiting from the proposed policy. Ishimaru (2014) stresses the idea that, as complicated as this task might be, one should also remember the diverse communities we live in. When you factor race and class into this undertaking, then the rules of engagement, the lives of all parties involved, should be respected. We are faced with race-based and economic educational inequities, and we are witnessing the change in our student population and relying on research that tells us that the key to student success is partnering schools with parents.

Parent involvement, engagement, and partnerships with schools have been identified as means to improve student success for K-12 students. The researcher agrees and believes in the research that has been presented on the subject but is relying on the theory that emerged from this study and proposes parent-school relationships as the paradigm that will show success in the early childhood setting. The following section will draw from the data analysis and show how building relationships with parents will increase child outcomes.

### **Parent/Leadership-School Relationship**

The landscape of early childhood education has been changing in recent years. Research supports that closing the education gap in K-12 by providing quality early childhood education to children ages three and four will be possible. This has resulted in shifting the general view from early childhood education being a family responsibility to a model to improve children's outcomes and educational success through investing in young children. The latter requires the support of the government and communities and active relationships between centers for early childhood education and parents.

The Oxford dictionary defines relationship as "the way in which two or more people or things are connected, or the state of being connected." When early childhood leadership and educators build relationships with parent, children see that the important people in their lives are working together. When a positive relationship is built between parents, leadership, and educators, parents will feel more comfortable to be part of their child's learning experiences. It is important to acknowledge and respect the parents who have trusted the care of their child to the hands of early childhood educators.

Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) concluded from their study on staff-parent communication in early childhood settings that formal means and channels of communication with parents tend to create parental

### ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

involvement that is very formal and even ritualized. Educators preferred informal communication that allowed them to exchange ideas and build relationships.

## **Defining Characteristics and Challenges of Effective Early Childhood Leaders**

Drawing from the data and the theory that emerged, effective dispositions of leaders in early childhood education could be summarized within the four domains of pedagogical leadership, administrative leadership, leadership essentials, and relational leadership.

### **Pedagogical Leadership**

The pedagogical leader is responsible to improve the science of teaching, support teachers, and help improve children's development and learning. Data analysis in this research identified necessary characteristics of this leader as an individual who is skilled in early childhood education and is a knowledge builder, implements a pedagogy to foster learning, supports and values teachers, models for teachers, creates an environment to support learning, and applies theory to practice.

### **Administrative Leadership**

This leader is responsible for strategic and operational planning of the program. It is the responsibility of this individual to create a vision and a mission for the program. Characteristics required to be effective in this position emerged as effective supervisor, having an understanding of resource limitations, being a voice for the field, being a finance manager, being a business and human resource manager, having awareness of oneself and others, understanding the law, and being able to meet regulations.

### **Leadership Essentials**

To be an effective leader, one should have certain personal skills and attributes. Dispositions of the leader can create a healthy environment that results in a greater degree of collaboration and efficacy. Essential dispositions that emerged for this role were broad, but the most commonly referred to were having social-emotional intelligence, being open to change, having a passion for children, being a good listener, being able to delegate, giving opportunity to others to step up, being an advocate for children and families, having dedication to the field, having clarity of purpose, having self-efficacy, and respecting culture, diversity, equity, and social justice.

### **Relational Leadership**

This leader focuses on the nature of the relationships that are built between the leader and the people he or she is leading. Caring is a major component of this leadership. The characteristics that are associated with this role consumed a considerable portion of the data. Those dispositions can be summarized as an individual who can focus on the child's well-being, build parents' capacity, educate parents in early childhood education, put family at the center of the child's ecosystem, empower parents to advocate for children, build relationships with parents, build a bridge between home and school learning, and support teacher/parent relationships.

## ***Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders***

### **Challenges**

The obstacles that early childhood leaders encounter can arise from many directions. This study explored ways to address the challenges these leaders were faced with. Interestingly, the most common challenge that was referred to was parents, followed by lack of leader preparedness, having inadequate public support, not being able to sustain skilled workforce, not having a consistent source of revenue, inadequacy of the system, low level of workforce education, staff turnover, being able to create a cohesive environment, creating a space with authenticity in practice, keeping doors open and having a business model to stay in business, multi-tasking, and staying informed on ever-changing regulations.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

For future research, the researcher suggests including early childhood leaders from both private and public early childhood programs as contributing participants. This will provide an inside view from individuals who are actually holding these positions and test the new finding against the framework. Multiple participants, including early childhood higher education educators, recommended changes in teacher preparation and asking for higher education to match the need to knowledge. Investigating effectiveness of early childhood teacher preparation can be another future study.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research investigated the characteristics needed for effective leadership in early childhood development and the challenges this leadership faces. This study led the researcher to understand the importance of relationship and care in early childhood education leadership. It is commonly agreed that teachers need to care for children, but this view is not stressed enough for the role of administrators and leaders. Looking back at the dozens of books and scholarly articles that were reviewed for this study, the majority of the concentration is on how to help a center director to become a leader. By many, leader was defined as an individual who has a mission and a vision to move the center for early childhood education forward. A lot of effort and resources are being invested in investigating ways to help this individual to lead. Sadly, there is not enough conversation and research about the need and the importance for this individual to not only care for children, but also build relationships with adults.

Leaders for early childhood education almost always assume the role of leadership after being a good, caring teacher with leadership abilities. It is important to help these leaders not to lose their caring attribute. It is important to make sure people we appoint to these positions do not lose the fact that they are there for the well-being of children. Loving and caring for children should be the first requirement listed for early childhood leadership positions.

National quality standards for early childhood education leaders can provide a shared understanding of the essential dispositions of an effective early childhood leader. Early childhood leadership quality standards can outline the knowledge, skills, and characteristics required for an effective, capable leader. They can be used as a core for the early childhood leader evaluation process and offer a tool for the leader's reflection, goal setting, and ongoing professional growth. Early childhood quality standards can be foundational to providing what is needed to support a quality program. Leaders who meet the

### **Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders**

standards of quality will support their teachers' professional growth and influence the quality of learning in a very powerful way. Based on this study, the researcher recommends the following as a set of standards for effective leaders in early childhood education:

1. Attain educational and knowledge level to meet the need of quality early childhood programs
2. Acquire essential dispositions and self-efficacy
3. Support teachers in understanding and implementing pedagogy
4. Respect culture, diversity, equity, and social justice
5. Be proficient in managerial and operational duties and field advocacy
6. Advocate and enact child's well-being
7. Build parents' capacity
8. Put family at the center of child's learning ecosystem
9. Empower parents to advocate for children
10. Build relationships with parents
11. Build a bridge between home and school learning
12. Support teacher/parent relationships

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**Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders**

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### *Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Leaders*

## **KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Administrative Leader:** Individual responsible for strategic operational planning of an organization.

**Early Childhood Leader:** Individual guiding an early childhood program to the future with a defined mission and vision. This individual has a solid grounding in child development knowledge and inspires staff.

**Early Childhood Program Director:** Individual responsible for providing general oversight to an early childhood program, which includes but is not limited to managing enrollment, hiring staff, and overseeing day-to-day activities.

**Educational Leader:** An individual who provides direction and exercises influence in an educational setting.

**Ethics of Care:** A theory that focuses more on the interconnectedness of people and places a strong moral significance on relationships with one as “carer” and the other as “cared for.”

**Pedagogical Leader:** Individual responsible for improving the science of teaching, supporting teachers, and helping improve children’s development and learning.

**Relational Leader:** An individual who creates a positive relationship within the organization to accomplish change to benefit the common good. There are five leadership components to the relational leadership model: inclusive, empowering, purposeful, ethical, and process oriented.