Support for School Leadership: Who is Feeding the Principal?

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AN EXPLORATION OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN PART C OF IDEA: VOICES FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract

Given the complexities of providing intervention services and supports to families of infants and toddlers with disabilities birth through 2 years of age, building educational leadership capacity from within the Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part C is important. Nevertheless, this area of educational leadership is woefully understudied. This article provides a summary of key themes that emerged from a qualitative survey of 44 identified educational leaders from seven states and various levels of the Part C program. Participants' understanding of effective leadership clustered into three areas: technical-functional knowledge that is unique to Part C, dispositions that have been identified elsewhere as characteristic of successful leaders, and skill sets that have also been recognized as important for leaders to possess. The article ends with a call to the field for additional research.

1. Part C Leadership: An Understudied Phenomenon

Listen to Diana LaRocco, Department of Educational Leadership, Director, Center for Public Health and Education Policy, University of Hartford discuss Educational Leadership in Part C of IDEA.

The Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities Program (Part C) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal early childhood special education program administered at the state level. The national program was designed to provide early intervention services and supports to families of infants and toddlers with disabilities birth through 2 years of age. Every state and territory in the United States participates, and each has a unique family centered, community-based, comprehensive, coordinated interagency system designed to ensure the availability of services and supports to eligible children and their families. Although how the Part C service-delivery system is carried out at the local level varies among the states and territories, effective implementation requires collective action and leadership on the part of many stakeholders, including family members, individual service providers, and community-based agencies that provide services to children and their families.

Each state and territory has a designated lead agency that administers the Part C program, and this too varies from state to state. Regardless, within each lead agency, a designated Part C coordinator has responsibility for administering the early intervention program so that it complies with all federal and local requirements. In that capacity, Part C coordinators serve as formal systems leaders. At the same time, other individuals within the Part C service delivery system and in various roles—local program administrators, direct service providers, family members, and higher education faculty—serve as formal and informal leaders for this critically important early childhood special education program. A local program administrator might engage with other service providers in efforts to change state-level Part C system policies to better meet the needs of eligible children and their families. A special education teacher might use a coaching strategy to address a mother's self-identified need to find an inclusive childcare setting for her daughter. To promote a team's goal of using evidence-based practices, a speech therapist might lead team members' self-study efforts by sharing an article. Each person in these illustrations demonstrates leadership by proactively influencing others "to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations—the wants and needs, aspirations and expectations—*of both leaders and followers* [emphasis in the original]" (MacGregor Burns, 1978, p. 19). In other words, leadership can be thought of as a process through which one person influences another to achieve common goals (Northouse, 2012).

In general, empirical investigations of leadership in early childhood education are scant, and this has been well documented by several authors (Aubrey, 2007; Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004; Rodd, 1996). What is available has been described by Aubrey (2007) as dominated by a few researchers and not well informed by theory. So too, the phenomenon of leadership within the Part C early childhood special education program is woefully understudied. An extensive search of several databases (Academic Search Premier, ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest, JSTOR Arts and Sciences I), using various combinations of descriptors (Part C, early intervention, early childhood special education and leader*), surfaced little about leadership in the context of the Part C program. Principally, authors have focused most often on program administration (McCracken Taylor, McGowan, & Linder, 2009) or master- and doctoral-level personnel preparation programs (Bricker, 2000; Spencer, Freund, & Browne, 2006). While these are critically important venues for skilled leaders, such conceptualizations restrict leadership to certain individuals in formal roles and within specified contexts. Moreover, a systematic search of roughly 20 years' worth of journal abstracts that routinely publish empirical research related to early intervention (i.e., *Infants and Young Children, Journal of Early Intervention, Topics in Early Special Education*) brought similar results. Here again, although some authors offered opinions and emphasized the importance of leadership in Part C (Epley, Gotto, Summers, Brotherson, Turnbull, & Friend, 2010; Rous, 2004; Woods & Snyder, 2009), studies specifically designed to examine leadership within this early childhood special education were absent.

2. Exploring the Concept of Leadership in Part C

In an attempt to begin to address the gap in the literature, an exploratory study was conducted. The guiding research question was: "How do individuals who work in Part C and are considered leaders generally understand effective leadership in early intervention?" The conceptual underpinnings of the study rested in the belief that "leader is not a role"; leadership could be "learned and is available to everyone" (Northouse, 2012, p. 15). As Sharon Lynn Kagan (1993) suggested, we are all leaders and followers. The individuals who emerge as leaders are not always the persons who carry an official title or the one who "marches at the head of the band" (Albright, 2007, p. xvii). Individuals in various roles in the Part C special education program and at all levels of the system lead, take action, and positively influence the families with whom they work, their colleagues, policy makers, and others. They exercise personal agency (Bandura, 1986, 1997) and take initiative to transform the status quo through intentional actions and influence that inspires others to work toward transcending goals (MacGregor Burns, 2003).

3. Methodology

This exploratory study was expressly designed to draw out participants' general understanding of leadership within the context of the Part C system. Exploratory research, as described by Marshall and Rossman (2011), "accepts the value of context and setting" and focuses on "understanding participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon under study" (p. 93). Consideration is given to the "complexity of views" and the researcher deliberately chooses to "rely as much as possible on participants' views of the situation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). The approach taken for this exploratory was constructivist, as described by Merriam (2009) and others (Creswell, 2007, 2008; Mertens, 2010). In a constructivist approach, the researcher sets out to interpret and make sense of the meaning of the phenomenon under study as expressed by those involved.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed, Internet-based survey comprised of a series of open-ended questions designed to draw out respondents' general understanding of effective leadership in Part C. There was no limit (words or characters) set on the length of the responses. Each state and territory has a Part C system; thus, individuals working within the system are spread out across each state in various programs, agencies, and locales. Using an Internet-based survey method did not require that participants be co-located or meet face-to-face, thereby making it useful for gathering information from qualified people over a wide geographic area (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009).

a.   Participant Recruitment

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit study participants. The goal of purposeful sampling is to generate a sample that is able to address the aims of study (Creswell, 2008). Specifically, individuals identified as leaders by state Part C

coordinators and others working in the system were sought because they would be best positioned to share their perspectives on leadership within the Part C program. A series of three emails were sent to 50 Part C state coordinators inviting participation in the study. Follow-up phone calls were made to identify interest and answer questions. Six Part C coordinators agreed to nominate up to 16 individuals who had demonstrated exceptional leadership efforts on behalf of the Part C program or the families with whom they worked. Of the six Part C coordinators, four nominated 40 individuals. To broaden the pool of potential participants to other states and locals, additional participants, who met the above criteria, were recruited through *network sampling*, in which successive referrals are used to recruit participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Individuals who were knowledgeable about or engaged in Part C efforts were asked to share study materials. In all, 72 individuals were invited via email to complete the online, open-ended survey. To maximize participation, individuals who did not respond to the initial invitation were contacted by e-mail two additional times (Dillman et al., 2009).

b. Sample Description

Forty-four individuals representing seven states responded to the survey. The states were located in the northwestern, central, and eastern United States. Respondents were distributed unevenly across the seven states. Individuals self-identified as program administrators ($n = 13$), direct service providers ($n = 8$), higher education faculty ($n = 7$), Part C coordinators ($n = 5$), professional development providers ($n = 4$), family members ($n = 4$), and technical assistance consultants ($n = 3$). Five were male and 39 were female. Respondents' mean age was 51.75 (range 29 - 66, $SD = 10.50$). Years of experience in early intervention ranged from 3 to 35 ($M = 19.77$, $SD = 8.67$). Participants indicated they had a broad depth and breadth of both formal and informal leadership experiences. Examples included membership in state-level interagency coordinating councils and leadership positions in local and national professional organizations.

c. Data Analysis

Verbatim responses to the open-ended survey questions were the data set for analysis. Procedures typically associated with qualitative research were used (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 2009). To enhance the credibility of the analysis, a colleague-researcher knowledgeable about the Part C system assisted with the data analysis, and data were examined and re-examined throughout the process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Using a *hand analysis* technique, data were analyzed independently on two levels. First, responses to each open-ended survey question were read several times to generate categories, themes, and patterns. Notes and memos were written to capture the initial themes and impressions. With each reading, categories, themes, and corresponding coding were refined and modified as necessary. Attention was paid to word repetitions and their synonyms and to terms used by respondents that were recognized as having a particular meaning or significance within the Part C setting. Second, the responses were analyzed across all survey questions using the same process. Finally, the independent data analyses were reviewed and consensus on the themes was obtained.

4. Effective Leadership in Part C

The leadership themes that emerged through the data analysis clustered into three areas: technical-functional knowledge that is unique to leading within the context of Part C, dispositions that have been identified elsewhere as characteristic of successful leaders, and skill sets that have also been recognized as important for leaders to possess. Notably, the respondents from each of the stakeholder subgroups evidenced little difference worth noting in their responses. Participants' answers across the open-ended survey questions were remarkably consistent, with some respondents referencing their answers to earlier questions and expanding on those.

Emergent themes organized under three broad areas are presented. Relevant leadership literature was inserted throughout to place participants' voices within broader discussions about effective leadership. Participant quotes were representative of responses and used to express their conceptualization of effective Part C leadership.

a.   Technical-functional knowledge

The area of technical-functional knowledge reflects expertise that is particular to an area of work or profession, in this case Part C of IDEA. Within this broad area, three distinct themes emerged: in-depth knowledge of federal education laws and regulations, state laws and regulations, and state Part C system policies; working knowledge of child development; and expertise in family dynamics, systems, and support.

Study participants indicated that to be effective leaders at any level of the Part C system must have in-depth knowledge of federal education laws and regulations, state laws and regulations, and state Part C system policies. One respondent wrote that an effective leader "thoroughly understands the principles and policies of Part C." While another stated, they should have "the ability to interpret these for others."

The benefits of understanding IDEA and Part C regulations, as well as state laws and policies, cannot be overstated. To lead effectively, individuals must be knowledgeable about the policy context in which the work takes place. As with other federal education programs, Part C regulations and federal policies affect all aspects of service delivery. States must meet federal monitoring requirements, conduct program evaluations, and ensure accountability. At the same time, state laws, regulations, and agency policies append additional layers to the policy context. Individuals with expertise in relevant federal and state rules are more apt to be effective leaders because this knowledge provides a powerful tool for accessing resources and appropriate supports. Moreover, the knowledge situates individuals as able advocates for systems change, a necessary leadership skill identified by participants that is discussed later.

Participants wrote that effective leaders in Part C have a working knowledge of "child development—in all areas of development." It is well established that the early years of life constitute a critical developmental period. This fact underpins a primary purpose of

early childhood special education—to enhance the development of infants and toddlers with disabilities. Appropriate services and supports during the early years can enhance a child's developmental gains, have the potential to prevent secondary problems, and can lead to improved long-term outcomes. Technical-functional expertise in child development is a basic building block in the provision of appropriate early intervention. As one respondent stated, "those that continue to educate themselves about children's development, and how to support it, have the foundation for being quality leaders."

Repeatedly, respondents explained that effective leaders needed to have expertise in "supporting families of young children with special needs." They wrote about leaders needing to understand "family dynamics," "family systems theory," and "family-centered" approaches to service delivery. Children live in families. Families, whatever their configuration, are their children's first teachers—helping them to develop and learn. A goal of early intervention is to recognize and advance family members' competence and efficacy beliefs related to engaging their children in naturally occurring, development-enhancing learning opportunities. As one participant said, "In this field, understanding and supporting family-centered practices is essential."

Part C of IDEA provides a statutory framework for focusing on infants and toddlers with disabilities within the context of the family. It codifies what is known about enhanced outcomes for young children whose families are involved in early intervention. The policy expectation is that professionals will facilitate the involvement of families and collaborate with them in the process of enhancing their children's development. Providing the support, information, and education necessary to maintain and enhance the family system and meet the unique needs of individual families does this. As one participant wrote, an effective Part C leader "is well versed in family systems theory, practices, and strategies." They have had "experience working with families." They engage families in shared decision-making and commit to service delivery within the context of families' routines and environments. Moreover, another respondent explained that Part C leaders "giv[e] parents tools so that they can be successful" and are "flexible in adjusting support" based on family priorities and concerns.

A third theme that surfaced within the area of technical-functional knowledge was an expressed belief that effective leaders in Part C have "expertise [in] evidence-based practices." Respondents wrote about the importance of having an understanding of "current research" in early intervention and being "knowledgeable about and committed to recommended practices for EI programs."

Evidence-based practices are interventions or strategies that are informed by research. For example, there is empirical evidence suggesting that a family centered approach to service delivery can have a positive effect on family satisfaction with the services and outcomes for the children and families (Bruder, 2010; Raspa et al.m 2010). Individual with expertise related to evidence-based practices are better able to work with families and others to guide them in making informed decisions about early intervention services that would meet the unique needs of each child and family. They are poised to ensure that services build family members' competence, capacity, and confidence in supporting

their children's development. As one respondent explained, being an effective leader means "being knowledgeable about current research and practice in Part C, practicing those skills, and helping others to attain them."

b. Dispositions

The area of effective leadership dispositions encompasses values, beliefs, and personal attributes that have been identified by theorists and researchers as characteristic of successful leaders. Among the related themes that emerged were responsiveness to diversity, integrity, life-long learning, reflective practice, high standards, and great expectations.

Study participants indicated that effective Part C leaders were responsive to personal differences (culture, individual, unique strengths or needs) not only among families but also among staff. Effective leaders were said to be "respectful of family cultures"— "culturally aware, and non-judgmental." As one respondent explained, effective leaders know "this is a unique world and that families are at all different places within the early intervention system." Rubin (2002) explained that leaders who are responsive to diversity are "adept at spanning boundaries of every type—between sectors, genders, races, religions, ethnicities, and preferences " (p. 94).

Concerning staff, a participant wrote, an effective Part C leader "considers the unique knowledge and perspectives of team members." As one respondent explained, they "understand individual learning styles and allow for individual strengths and differences, utilizing individual strengths." Likewise, Kouzes and Posner (2012) asserted that effective leaders view difference as an asset and can take another's perspective— understanding his or her aspirations and worries.

Effective Part C leaders were said to act with integrity and fairness; they "practice their profession ethically." Personal integrity is reflected in "caring about how the well-being of people is affected by one's actions. A two-sided portrait . . . one that includes certain habits of thinking and one that concern for relationships and others—empathy and perspective taking" (Luke, 1998, p. 228). Trust relationships and a leader's ability to influence another are built on a foundation of competence, openness, reliability, and integrity (Hoy & Smith, 2007).

Study participants also explained that effective Part C leaders see the worth in lifelong learning and seek new knowledge for themselves and those with whom they engage. As one respondent made clear, a "leader must also be an engaged learner—always seeking new information." Effective leaders were described as being characteristically self-aware, valuing reflective practice, and promoting the same in others. A leader who is self-aware "continually comes to understand his or her unique talents, strengths, sense of purpose, core values, beliefs and desires. It can include having a basic and fundamental awareness of one's knowledge, experience, and capabilities" (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 324). Effective Part C leaders, one respondent noted, "ask, 'What can we learn?'—Challenge people to try new approaches, search outside the group for

innovative ways to improve." In a similar way, Preskill and Brookfield (2009) identified learning tasks of leadership that included learning how to be open to the contributions of others, reflect critically on their practice, and support the growth of others. The study participants seemed to echo these tasks in their responses.

Participants identified effective Part C leaders as having "high expectations that are clearly communicated," "high standards for self and others," and "the ability to help others see their potential." Moreover, effective Part C leaders were said to demonstrate the "belief that every child and family has potential"; thus, they recognize a family's capabilities and competencies. In a similar way, Kouzes and Posner (1999) wrote, "positive expectations yield positive results. They also begin to create positive images in our minds, which yield other positive possibilities. Positive futures for self and others are first constructed in our minds" (p. 68). Study participants conceptualized effective leaders as supporting and encouraging others to achieve more than they believed they could achieve. In other words, leaders "strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence" (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 22).

c.   Skills

Participants described several sets of skills needed to be an effective leader in Part C. Often cited competencies included those related to being a team member and advancing a team approach. Interpersonal skills were also mentioned frequently, especially the ability to communicate well.

Study participants wrote that effective leaders should have an "in depth understanding of team building." As on person explained, "teaming is vital to early intervention so the leader must be able to work within and to maintain a high functioning team." The identification of team skills as necessary for successful leadership in Part C is not surprising because teams are integral to early intervention policy and service provision. The regulations provide for a multidisciplinary team assessment of a child and the child's family. As a team, the child's family and Part C personnel plan, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of services designed to address the child's and family's unique priorities, needs, and resources. Required team competencies, as described by participants, included building team members' commitment to a "vision of an ideal service system" and motivating them to implement that vision. An effective leader, one participant wrote, "shares her unique knowledge and perspective and considers the unique knowledge and perspectives of team members." They "know what they don't know and utilize the expertise and experience of team members—experts in the field."

Effective Part C leaders were described by participants as having the ability to advance collaboration and being adept at "involving the whole team in making decisions about how things will be done, making sure that everyone takes ownership for greater buy-in." Similarly, researchers have identified the importance of leaders having the ability to foster collaborative relationships (Armstrong, Kinney, & Clayton 2009; Kouzes & Posner 2012; Rodd, 2005). As one participant observed, "a leader must have the interpersonal skills that allow them to work well with others and . . . bring people together to

accomplish goals." Demonstrations of collaborative interpersonal behaviors are fundamental to building and sustaining productive relationships with early intervention staff, families, and other stakeholders. Having well-developed interpersonal competency and the capacity to engage productively with others are hallmarks of emotionally intelligent leaders (Goleman, 2000). In fact, George (2000) proposed that the ability to appraise and express emotion, use emotion to enhance cognitive processing and decision-making, understand emotions, and manage emotions all contribute to effective leadership (p. 1039). The study participants likewise expressed an understanding that these abilities help individuals carry out the tasks of a leader.

Critically important interpersonal skills, reported participants, are the ability to listen actively (non-evaluative and appropriately supportive) and communicate effectively orally and in writing. One respondent wrote, an effective leader "listens without judgment." Kouzes and Posner (2011) explained that leaders "build relationships through listening" (p. 70) deeply to others and learning about their hopes, beliefs, fears, and aspirations.

Participants also indicated that effective leaders establish strong networks of information sharing (regular, clear, and consistent) and maintain strong lines of communication among early intervention staff, families, and other stakeholders (horizontal, top down, and bottom-up). Effective Part C leaders were described as being skilled at "communicating with [the] entire range of stakeholders, engaging relevant parties in problem-solving, consistently building systemic-capacity." Kouzes and Posner (2011) similarly wrote, "sharing information is a critical determinant in developing people's capacity" (p. 125).

Effective Part C leaders were described by participants as having "the commitment and determination to advocate for children and families" and "for what is right." To be effective, Part C leaders must act to influence local, district, state, and national decisions affecting early intervention. They "know when to engage families, which should be early on in the process, not thinking about family input as an afterthought, but involving families at all levels to influence policies and practices." Today's times, Hesselbein (2004) wrote, call for leaders who do not push from the rear, but lead from the front. Effective leaders harness the power of individual action to promote change and make a difference. They work with others and support them in making their voices heard.

5. A Call for Researchers to Examine Leadership in Part C

This exploratory study provided a broad-brush picture of how one small group of individuals working in the Part C special education program generally understand effective leadership. Although this study is limited by the method used to collect data and the sample size, the results provided beginning insights into the knowledge and skills considered necessary for effective Part C leadership, a woefully understudied

phenomenon. By bringing participants' understanding of leadership to the fore, "a certain flow of meaning begins . . . and a larger conversation begins to form" (Jaworski, 1996, p. 185). This exploration was intended to ignite conversations, and the paper serves as a call to other researchers to examine various aspects of leadership in Part C. Future research is central to building leadership capacity within the Part C program and to fulfilling its promise. Additional research with a more representative sample should be conducted. Strategies could include national surveys, in-person interviews, or group discussions. Case studies of leaders at all levels of the Part C system could also be informative. Finally, other researchers should explore whether particular system structures facilitate or inhibit expressions of leadership within and across the levels of the Part C program.

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