Abstract:

On October 16, 2013 a national, early childhood special education leadership summit was held in San Francisco, CA at DEC’s 29th Annual International Conference on Young Children with Disabilities and Their Families. The summit format was a facilitated, focus group discussion in which participants shared their perceptions of what is needed to build and preserve the field’s leadership capital. There were 18 participants who were nominated as leaders in the field and represented researchers, faculty, program administrators, teachers, other personnel, and families of children who have received special education services. This draft report summarizes the background and rationale, methods, preliminary findings, and recommended actions.

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Background and Rationale

The complexities of providing quality early intervention services and supports to young children and their families under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) present many challenges and opportunities to the field. Among others is a need for leadership capacity to ensure the achievement of quality outcomes for children and families, the development of appropriate learning environments and curricula, and the identification and implementation of evidence-based interventions.

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) is a subdivision of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities. DEC’s focus is individuals who work with or on behalf of children with special needs, birth through age eight, and their families. The organization aims to ensure that “professionals and families are competent in identifying, delivering, and evaluating needed supports and practices for children and families at the individual and system levels” (“About DEC”, n.d.).

Historically, DEC has been a leader in the field of early childhood special education promoting policies and advancing evidence-based practices to support the development of young children with special needs and to create a system of support for all young children and their families. Yet, mostly absent from the organization’s structure or conference proceedings has been a venue that provides opportunities for individuals interested in leadership, as a concept or a practice, to affiliate and develop capacity in themselves and the field. In early 2012, the principal investigator (PI) petitioned the DEC Executive Board and they approved the development of a leadership special interest group (SIG) to provide such an opportunity to its members. The PI is the DEC Leadership SIG Chair. The SIG’s inaugural meeting was held in October 2012 at DEC’s 28th Annual International Conference on Young Children with Special Needs and Their Families. The SIG meeting was well attended. The participants determined that a next step would be to hold a national summit on leadership in early childhood special education to begin a discussion on how best to build and preserve the field’s leadership capital.
Leadership capital encompasses “human capacity and active engagement in leadership tasks” (Research Center for Leadership in Action, n.d., ¶ 1). As a field, building stocks of leadership capital is central to ensuring high-quality systems and achieving child and family outcomes. Well documented is the fact that empirical investigations of leadership in early childhood education are scant (Aubrey, 2007; Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004; Rodd, 1996, 2005). Aubrey (2007) described what is available as dominated by a few researchers and not well informed by theory. So too, the phenomenon of leadership within the context of early childhood special education is woefully understudied. An extensive search of several databases (Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR Arts and Sciences I) using various combinations of descriptors (i.e., early childhood special education and leader*) uncovered no empirical studies that aimed to specifically examine leadership in early childhood special education. Further, the term “leadership” in early childhood education has been associated primarily with program administration (e.g., McCracken Taylor, McGowan, & Linder, 2009) or master- and doctoral-level personnel preparation programs (e.g., Bricker, 2000; Spencer, Freund, & Browne, 2006). Although these are critically important venues for skilled leaders, such conceptualizations restrict leadership to certain individuals within specified contexts and roles.

Individuals in all roles and at all levels of the early childhood special education system can and do practice leadership by behaving in ways that positively influence the families with whom they work, their colleagues, policy makers, and others. Such actions are directed purposefully at accomplishing tasks that move those involved toward shared, meaningful goals. An investigation that engages leaders in the field in a process of considering present and future leadership needs and translating the needs into actions has the potential to build the field’s leadership capacity while addressing the gap in the literature.

The purpose of this project was to bring together a national cadre of researchers, faculty, program administrators, teachers, other personnel, and families of children who receive special education services to participate in a focus group discussion about the present state of and future needs for leadership in early childhood special education.
Methodology

A national, early childhood special education leadership summit was held on October 16, 2013 in San Francisco, CA at DEC’s 29th Annual International Conference on Young Children with Disabilities and Their Families. The summit was supported by a small competitive grant awarded to Dr. Diana J. LaRocco through the Institute for Translational Research in the College of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions at the University of Hartford in Connecticut. The grant funds were used to pay for the focus group facilitator, Dr. Rob Corso, breakfast and lunch for participants, and a small stipend for focus group transcriptionists, Katie Ancell and Nancy Ely. A third transcriptionist, Lori Blake, was not compensated for her time because her college supported her attendance.

The summit format and project methodology was a facilitated, focus group discussion in which participants were asked to share their perceptions of what is needed to build and preserve the field’s leadership capital. The principal investigator (PI) is Dr. Diana J. LaRocco and the co-principal investigator (Co-PI) is Dr. Deborah A. Bruns. Dr. Sarika S. Gupta and Dr. Kimberly Sopko provided assistance with the data analysis procedures and the development of this report.

Sampling Strategies and Participant Recruitment

Upon approval of the University’s Human Subjects Committee, the PI employed a nomination process to identify individuals who have demonstrated leadership capacity on the local, state, or national levels. Nominations sought from organizations and other stakeholder groups including, but not limited to, the DEC Executive Board; other DEC SIGs; state-level DEC subdivisions; the IDEA Section 619 State Coordinators Consortium; the IDEA Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association; Family Voices; and university personnel preparation programs.

In all, 70 individuals representing a balance of researchers, faculty, program administrators, teachers, other personnel, and families of children who have received special education services were nominated. Nominees received an email invitation explaining the purpose of the summit and the
voluntary nature of participation. The invitation directed individuals to an Internet-based application form, and a copy of the informed consent form was included as an attachment to the email. Participants were informed that there were (a) no fees for attending the summit; (b) they must cover their own travel expenses, including lodging; and (c) participants will be selected from each stakeholder group listed above on a first come first served basis.

**Data Collection: The Focus Group Discussion**

Focus group discussions are a qualitative interview method for obtaining participants’ perceptions on a defined topic of interest in an open, nonthreatening environment (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Using Krueger and Casey’s (2000) focus group recommendations as a guide, the session was structured as follows: (a) welcome, (b) overview of the topic, (c) review of ground rules, and (d) the questions (p. 107).

During the welcome, participants were thanked for attending the summit and the purpose of the project and the day’s logistics were reviewed. Then, ground rules for the conversation were covered. In order to adequately record the information shared, attendees were asked to (a) speak up so everyone could hear, (b) speak one at a time, and (c) refrain from side conversations. To protect confidentiality, participants were reminded to refrain from using the names of people, places, or personal identifiers during the discussion. The facilitator managed the time and kept the discussion moving so that everyone had an opportunity to share his or her perspectives on leadership. The overarching questions addressed through large and small group discussions included the following:

1. What are the current leadership needs at all levels of the early childhood special education system?

2. What are the future leadership talent needs at all levels of the early childhood special education system?

3. What are needed actions to develop a cadre of leaders that are prepared take on various leadership roles and responsibilities at all levels of the early childhood special education system?
The discussion was digitally recorded and transcribed in real-time during the meeting using word processing software and laptop computers. Dr. LaRocco also took notes on chart paper and audio recorded the large group discussions. Breaks and meals were scheduled according to the needs of the group and the pace of the discussion.

Data Analysis

The transcripts and chart paper served as the data set for analysis. Procedures typically associated with qualitative research were used (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data set was examined and re-examined several times throughout the analysis process to enhance credibility. First, Drs. LaRocco, Bruns, Gupta, and Sopko independently analyzed the data, and notes and memos were written to capture initial themes and impressions. With each reading, themes were refined and modified as necessary. Then, the independent data analyses were compared and consensus on the themes was reached.

Finally, a member check with the original focus group participants was conducted. The purpose of the member check was to confirm with the participants that the findings and recommended actions that emerged from coding the transcripts made sense and reflected what was discussed in the focus group. Individuals confirmed that the report reflected the focus group member’s discussions.

Results: Findings and Recommended Actions

There were 18 focus group participants representing researchers, faculty, program administrators, teachers, other personnel, and families of children who have received special education services. The findings and recommended actions presented next are those that emerged through the analysis described above. The direct quotes are offered are representative of the conversations that took place.

Finding 1 Individual Leader Competencies: Focus group participants identified a number of linked skills, attitudes, and knowledge sets necessary for leaders in ECSE. Below is a listing of the
essential competencies that surfaced during the discussions, with quotes that are representative of participants’ statements. Although some competencies are unique to the field of ECSE, most align with effective leadership practice.

• *Working knowledge of the ECSE system (e.g., laws, regulations, policies)*

"You’ve got to know something about the field—intimately, what IDEA is about, you’ve got to have a good strong background in the law." "Working knowledge of each system." “Understand policies and budget.”

• *Self-awareness and Reflection*

"What makes a good leader is knowing what you don’t know and who you need to go to. And fostering teams of people who know enough and have the skills and resources to get done what needs to be [done]." "Be reflective, what worked and what didn’t and learn from those mistakes." “Need to learn to pace themselves.”

• *Passion for the work*

"The core understanding and the passion and desire to make change." “At every level people are responsible and have the ability to change.” “Passion - practitioners and administrators want to do right by children and families.”

• *Seek and use input*

"Often, we ask for input from a broad sector of folks, but then we do nothing with their input—honor and implement the input." “We need researchers who ask the right questions and provide the data to disprove or support an intervention.” “Need to know reliable places to look for information…and be competent to find what they need.”

• *Gather, organize, synthesize, and disseminate information*

"Someone who can synthesize information given to them." "Organization is it- there is so much information is out there, but the people to organize it." “How do we prioritize the information so
we can use it?” “How do you get [info] out to the people who don’t know what they don’t know?”

- **Growth orientation**

  “The field keeps growing; not stagnant.” "Need to be risk-taker, and that the system celebrates the risk takers.” “If there are issues and it changes things, it is a good thing.” “Should not be a loss of early intervention, but the celebration of moving on.” “We don’t know even in 5 years what people will be doing [with technology] but recognizing we have got to keep moving forward.”

- **Relationship builder**

  "People who are better at fostering relationships are better leaders." “You can’t substitute the relationship of human interaction.” “Develop the relationships not the service.”

- **Visibility and presence**

  "Need to get out and see what’s happening." "Administrators into programs, into classrooms, early intervention.” “We have to invite ourselves [to the table] and get ourselves invited.”

- **Professional developer, teacher, and facilitator**

  "The talent would be interpreting. That good adult learning, so taking new content that is difficult and helping make connections to stuff they already know to be true.” “Being intentional about sharing knowledge” "Teaching people how to advocate.”

- **Broker, partner, and collaborator**

  "Brokering partnerships in the community. People who see that as a priority.” “Valuing shared responsibility” “Personable, being able to work with others”

- **Communicator**

  “The ability to get the consistent message out there. Leaders are able to see the implications and articulate that to teachers, family and practitioners.” "Leaders creating stories to help interpret these requirements [so they] make sense to the people who have to implement them.” “I think getting that story out there is an important piece.”
• **Advocate**

“I think political savvy and the ability to advocate at all levels is important.” “You have to be able to advocate with the teachers down the hall and collaborate.” “Young people want as a mentor someone that establishes communication and advocacy and a champion.”

• **Ethic of accountability**

“Leadership at every level needs to come out strong in support of [accountability] and then figure out what the people under you need to know and learn in order to bring them at the same place.”

“We need the data to provide the effect on change.”

**RECOMMENDED ACTION 1A:** Conduct systematic research that identifies the common foundation of leadership skills, attitudes, and knowledge sets necessary for leaders in ECSE that cut across the levels and types of roles.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION 1B:** Disseminate information about leadership skills, attitudes, and knowledge to increase professional and public awareness about the importance of leadership capital in the ECSE field.

**Finding 2 Teams of Leaders:** Participants acknowledged the expectation is not for a single person to possess each and every identified leadership competency. Rather, *ECSE requires teams of leaders at all levels of the system*. This concept can be thought of as “shared leadership” or leadership where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. One participant explained, “It’s not about any one person or any one organization, but rather a team of folks working together, supporting each other.”

Another stated, “At [the] leadership, level we always have to think about sustainability, a team approach rather than an individual.” Participants acknowledged the importance of respecting individual contributions to a team, “We need to be mindful of what everyone is putting into it” and explored the challenge of individualism, “Fragmentation and lack of consistency make it hard to know which rules to
Considerable discussion centered on various ways to describe and otherwise characterize shared leadership. Terms used included integrated, tiered, collaborative, shared, cross-agency, and cross-sector.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION 2A:** Build multi-level leadership teams to ensure the field has the necessary attitudes, skills, and knowledge sets needed to move ECSE forward. Related activities would include the identification of stakeholders who should be part of a leadership team, the needs assessment of skills, and the provision of training on teaming (preservice and professional development).

**RECOMMENDED ACTION 2B:** Work collaboratively to develop a clearly articulated position statement that defines leadership in our field as shared and team-based.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION 2C:** Conduct systematic research to understand fully the challenges and barriers affecting our ability to successfully recruit, grow, and retain effective, committed leaders in the field of ECSE.

**Finding 3 Leader Development:** Building leadership capital in ECSE requires “intentional preparation” at all levels. Participants described how individuals are often unprepared or underprepared to take on leadership roles. A participant described how individuals “fall into doing [ECSE], and then they get promoted and get into influential roles and aren’t prepared for it.” Participants stressed the importance of systematically cultivating and supporting developing leaders. A participant explained, “There are people who are determined, in it for the long haul; identify them, and nurture them.” Another person talked about engaging families and using their experience, “Give the families the supports so that they can be brought back in 5 - 10 years [to lead and share their experiences with early childhood].” Participants talked about how “there are actual skills that you need as well as knowledge. Training and understanding that needs to happen. . . . Building these skills leads to better leaders.”
**RECOMMENDED ACTION 3:** Intentionally prepare leaders beginning at the preservice level and throughout their career. A meaningful, comprehensive system of leadership development in “which preservice preparation and ongoing professional development are integrated” is needed. Some participants talked about models and research in the business literature on which the field can draw. The necessary leadership development system was characterized as needing to be sustainable, crossing levels and sectors (stakeholders).

Participants described many varied strategies and methods for developing future leaders, nurturing emerging leaders, and supporting those who currently lead. What follows is a list of the strategies that emerged during the discussions, with quotes that are representative of participants’ statements.

- DEC should continue the conversation about leadership development and sustainability.
  - Disseminate information to the field about leadership needs.
  - Publish, Voices from the Field articles in *Young Exceptional Children*
  - Share ways to build leadership capacity
  - Continue the momentum of the DEC Leadership SIG and this summit
- Reach out to leader aspirants
  "Leaders have to reach out to other people. Having opportunities at the conference and people currently serving as a leader are supporting the leadership of others."
- Provide confidence building experiences and opportunities
  “Access to good leader models.” “A lot of people in our field who don’t see themselves as people who have the capacity to make change—a sense of efficacy, a sense of self-efficacy is something that needs to be built in at every level.”
- Harness technology
  “Putting in a technology-based community, hooking people up to have conversations. “Texting, blogging and social communication.” “Sharing ideas and strategies rather than recreating the wheel.”
• Create a system with a formal structure of leadership professional development options.
  o Create and disseminate training materials aimed at families, practitioner, administrators, faculty, and students focused on development of leadership behaviors in multiple formats (e.g., webinar, youtube.com tutorials).
  o Develop communities of practice
    “Community of practice for leaders who are within the same focus, but also across sectors. Where people feel supported, from a community rather than from direct supervisor.” “Build communities and reflective practice for people.”
  o Institute mentoring and coaching processes and programs
    “Experience with a mentor and a coach is where new leaders begin to develop their style and their skills and can pass it on.” “Supervision and mentoring, has to be ongoing process, over and over, built into everything we do.” “Create opportunities for current leaders to mentor future leaders.”
  o Employ job embedded professional development
    “We don’t have all the answers, but we do know that relationships work and job embedded learning”. “You can do the content specific knowledge, but when it comes to doing the work, they need the real work experience. Reflective practice and intentional learning.”
  o Offer leadership development boot camps (national, state, and local)
  o Offer a leadership development institute (national, state, and local)

Summary

Participants generally agreed that current and future leadership needs are similar. Early childhood leaders need certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be effective; need to work in multi-level teams sharing leadership for the greatest benefit to the field; and need professional development opportunities at the start of and throughout their career. Actions recommended by participants include
systematic research about necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes as well as research regarding the challenges and barriers of recruiting, growing, and retaining leaders in the early childhood field. Other actions needed include building multi-level leadership teams; working collaboratively to develop a position statement about team-based leadership in early childhood; and a comprehensive, coherent, and collaborative system of intentional preparation.
References


