An Exploration of Educational Leadership in Part C of IDEA: Voices From the Field

by Diana J. LaRocco, EdD

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 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

The Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities Program (Part C) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal early childhood 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