

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Ideal Leadership in Head Start Programs: Understanding Leadership from the Perspectives of Teachers and Directors in an Era of Changing Expectations and Increased Accountability

Sandra E. Gonzalez  
California State University, Long Beach

The purpose of this study was to examine how directors and teachers define ideal leadership practices of Head Start programs. Data were collected by means of interviews and completion of a demographic questionnaire and an adapted version of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) from six programs in Southern California. The findings revealed ideal leadership practices in alignment with the practices of transformational leadership. Directors described ideal leadership practices to include a clear vision, collaboration, and staff motivation. Teachers described ideal leadership practices to include visibility of the director at the classroom level, leading by example, encouragement, and professional development opportunities. The results of this study are critically important with the shifts in policy to increase quality of and expand access to early childhood education programs for all children. Ideal leadership practices are vital to meeting the needs of the changing expectations of Head Start programs.

*Keywords:* leadership; Head Start; qualitative research

There is currently a new valuing of early childhood education and corresponding significant shifts in policy (Gammage, 2006; Johns, 2005; Mitchell, 2002). The field of early childhood education has increased in importance due to the benefits associated with participation in quality programs. Children who attend quality early childhood education programs, including programs such as Head Start, are more likely to have later success in school and life. However, while the field of early childhood education has increased in significance, there is scant literature on leadership at the early childhood education level and great variance in the manner that services are delivered. The shifts in policy to increase access to participation in early childhood education and increased accountability for quality of programs require practices of effective leadership. Understanding the desired leadership practices in early childhood education settings including Head Start can increase consistency and quality service delivery.

Over the past few decades, public school researchers have consistently reported that school leadership is vital in developing and sustaining school level conditions believed essential for instructional improvement (Rosenholtz, 1989; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). The need for ECE leadership is just as great as the need in later grades of public school, but the form of leadership

will likely be different for ECE programs. The purpose of this paper is to identify what effective leadership practice is in terms of processes and outcomes within the field of ECE (Mujis, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs, 2004). ECE is different from education in the later grades. There is a close connection to families as partners in the education of children, a developmental approach in a more personal atmosphere that attends to the whole child, and in the case of Head Start, there are heavy demands upon administrators to ensure that programs are following rules and regulations. Given these unique conditions of ECE, this research explores how current directors and teachers define effective leadership practices and strategies that directors, site supervisors, and administrators can implement to increase program quality and teacher motivation.

Head Start represents the most important effort in early childhood education in the United States, serving over 1.1 million children (age's birth to 5) and families every year. Head Start is a federally funded preschool program that serves children and their families that are economically disadvantaged by providing them with comprehensive services to ensure school readiness. It has been a premiere early childhood program for over 40 years (Jacobson, 2007). In alignment with the President's proposal, investment in federal Head Start programs is likely to continue to grow. The President's plan will maintain and build on current Head Start investments to support a greater share of infants, toddlers, and 3-year-olds in America's Head Start centers, while state preschool settings will serve a greater share of 4-year-olds (Early Learning, 2013). The President's plan also includes greater accountability of Head Start programs.

## GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY IN HEAD START

Head Start programs are mandated to follow federal regulations that define standards and minimum requirements for operations and services (Office of Head Start, 2011). Compliance with the regulations is key to meeting the requirements of the grant, school readiness, and for continued funding. The push for educational reform and increased accountability that has been a common topic of discussion in the K-12 setting is now transcending transitioning to the preschool level. This has led to changes in the landscape and accountability of Head Start programs. New policy integrated into the federal regulations requires Head Start programs to demonstrate and ensure the delivery of quality services to the children served in order to prevent losing their funding. The Health and Human Services Secretary referred to this policy as an essential step "in raising the bar on quality in Head Start programs." In addition, this policy also demonstrates the Obama Administration's effort to ensure that the "program fulfills that mission by holding programs accountable for classroom quality and high standards of program integrity" (Administration for Children and Family Services, 2014). For the first time since Head Start's inception, there have been few opportunities to introduce competition in the grant process. Prior to the passing of this policy, if an entity was awarded a Head Start grant and complied with standards (minimum compliance or corrected deficiencies when they arose) then renewal was automatic (Health and Human Services, 2010). The change in policy requires more accountability on program outcomes and compliance to Head Start federal regulations.

### Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to address the gap in the literature and identify

leadership practices that directors and teachers perceive as ideal for effective leadership in Head Start programs that to allow for more consistent delivery of quality service. This study captures the voices of those who are in the field and defines what constitutes ideal leadership from their experiences. This study investigates the manner in which Head Start directors and teachers define leadership and highlights some of the common themes regarding ideal leadership. Specifically, this study explores the role of transformational leadership in Head Start programs. This study was guided by the following research questions: a) What are the perceptions of Head Start directors on ideal practices of leadership? b) What are the perceptions of Head Start teachers on ideal practices of leadership? and, c) How do the perceptions of directors compare and contrast to the perceptions of teachers?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of this study, transformational leadership was the theoretical framework used to analyze effective leadership practices in early childhood education settings. Transformational leadership is defined as a “process in which a leader engages with others to develop a connection that raises the level of motivation and morale in both the leader and follower” (Northouse, 2010). This type of leadership style involves the leader being able to identify needed change, create a vision, and inspire followers to meet that vision. In this approach, the leader is attentive to staff needs and makes use of intrinsic motivation to help staff reach and maximize their fullest potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

This study specifically, integrated Kouzes and Posner’s model of transformational leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2003, 2007) conducted extensive research to determine the leadership competencies that are essential in leading a successful organization and identified five fundamental practices that allow leaders to get extraordinary things accomplished: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Northouse, 2008).

The first practice, model the way, is one in which leaders are able to find their own voice and express it to others (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Leaders are clear about their own values and philosophy before being able to guide others. In addition, an important concept in this practice is that leaders follow through on their promises and commitments and affirm the common values they share with staff.

Inspire a shared vision, the second practice, is one in which leaders passionately believe they can make a difference and create a compelling vision to guide people’s behaviors (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Northouse, 2010). In alignment with this practice, leaders are able to envision the future and create an ideal image of how to guide the organization. Leaders are able to visualize future positive outcomes and communicate the vision to staff.

The third practice, challenge the process, is the willingness of leaders to challenge the status quo and take the risk of stepping into the unknown (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). The leader, in accordance with this practice, is not afraid of challenging the norm in an attempt to make things better for the organization. This includes being willing to change, improve, innovate, and grow.

Fourth, the practice of enable others to act, is the ability of outstanding leaders to effectively work with people (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). In alignment with this practice, leaders are able to encourage, foster collaboration, and build trust with staff and key stakeholders

(Northouse, 2010). Teamwork and cooperation are highly valued by the leader.

Lastly, the practice of encourage the heart, is one in which the leader is able to recognize the contributions that staff make. Leaders encourage the heart by rewarding others for their accomplishments (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Northouse, 2010). Effective leaders are attentive to this need and rely on intrinsic motivation as a means of giving praise and recognition to staff.

In summary, the Kouzes and Posner Leadership model is one that engages leaders to inspire staff to want to accomplish extraordinary things. Transformational leadership is the practice effective leaders use to transform values into actions, visions into realities, challenges into innovations, separateness into collaboration, and risks into rewards (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). It is about a creating and maintaining a climate in which staff are able to turn challenging opportunities into remarkable successes. This model is one that can be implemented in a variety of settings including the field of education.

## Application in Education

The application of transformational leadership in the field of education, including early childhood education, is one that can be effective in achieving the purposes of student achievement and delivery of quality services. This model has been effective in assisting school leaders in creating a school culture conducive to student learning (Lucas & Valentine, 2002). Lucas & Valentine (2002), in a study conducted to assess principal leadership and its impact on school culture, found that school leaders are the primary source for setting and articulating a vision that fosters a collaborative culture to facilitate school learning. Two of the most effective ways to increase student achievement are through effective leadership and strong school culture (Peterson & Deal, 2002). In the field of education, it takes a collaborative team approach to accomplish extraordinary results. The model of transformational leadership allows for leaders to mobilize followers to share the same vision and meet the needs of students (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Transformational leaders have been found to have a strong impact and influence on student achievement (McREL, 2004; Lucas, 2002). It is important for school systems, including the field of early childhood education, to discover the type of leadership that is most likely to improve school culture and, as a result, the delivery of quality services.

The Kouzes and Posner Leadership model is relevant to this study because it provides a foundation of specific practices that leaders in early childhood education, including Head Start, can implement in order to create an environment that fosters and embraces the vision of student achievement. In recent years, Head Start programs have increased in size, scope, and complexity, and more accountability has been placed on Head Start to demonstrate effectiveness. To successfully address these changes, Head Start directors must have the knowledge, skills, and commitment to guide programs effectively in a changing world (Office of Head Start, 2011). The Office of Head Start has referred to effective leaders in Head Start as individuals who are able to support, motivate, outreach to the community, and empower others to believe in the vision of the program. These are all concepts that are in alignment with the practices of transformational leadership. Further, this theoretical framework is able to provide the lens to operationalize and assess the research questions as they relate to effective leadership in education, including Head Start, in an era of accountability.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality experts and well-regarded quality improvement programs universally express the important role that top management plays in defining, measuring, and improving quality. Scholars in the field of early childhood education recognize the important role leaders have in the implementation of a high-quality program. The work that directors are responsible for includes management and leadership functions that have an impact on program quality.

Today an increasing number of infants, toddlers, and young children are attending early childhood education programs that provide them with their first experience outside the home and lay the foundation for later school success (Nupponen, 2005). Early childhood educators are the most important ingredient shaping the delivery of quality educational experiences, after parents. In preschool and early childhood education programs, all staff are responsible for creating and maintaining an environment conducive to cognitive, emotional, and social learning, but the administrator is the “primary architect” (73) and promoter of the values and standards that ensure everyone and everything in the school building functions adequately (Gur, 2011).

As the concept of leadership continues to be on the radar, one common finding is that effective leadership matters to the success of early childhood programs. Effective leadership in early childhood programs results in quality programs and services for young children and their families. Capable and responsible leadership is an important factor identified in determining the most and least successful children’s settings and services. Leaders of ineffective settings were unable to develop their staff to make services the central vision (Bloom & Sheerer, 1992).

The daily decisions that leaders make are influenced by their own views of quality, and impact how they choose to implement what they believe quality to be in early childhood programs (Lesson, 2012; Nupponen, 2005). Although individual perspectives are often overlooked, program directors are the “gatekeepers to quality” (citation with page). As leaders of early childhood programs, program directors’ view of quality set the tone for implementation of quality in their programs (Bloom & Sheerer, 1992; Lesson, 2012). Directors of early childhood programs have a multitude of responsibilities in the development, implementation, and evaluation of their programs. Leaders of early childhood programs must have strong leadership skills in order to implement high-quality programs (Bloom & Sheerer, 1992). A qualitative study conducted by Sciaraffa (2004) demonstrated that personal characteristics and values that influence directors of high-quality programs include “concern for children and families, high expectations, value of trust, respect, sense of professionalism, belief in teamwork, and high demands” (12). These characteristics are in alignment with the practices of transformational leaders, and therefore transformational leadership is an effective approach to the implementation of a high-quality program.

Morgan (2000) identified eight areas of competency that are important in the role of program director. The eight areas include the ability to plan and implement a developmentally appropriate care and education program for children and families; the ability to develop and maintain an effective organization; the ability to plan and implement administrative systems that effectively carry out the program’s mission, goals, and objectives; the ability to administer effectively a program of personnel management and staff development; the ability to foster good community relations and to influence the child care policy that affects the program; the ability to maintain and develop the physical facility; the legal knowledge necessary for effective management; and the ability to apply financial management tools. These competencies referenced by Morgan (2000) demonstrate how the work that early childhood administrators

engage in has a direct link to program quality. Many of the competencies identified are found in directors who have the knowledge base necessary to lead, develop effective systems, and establish working relationships with staff.

A similar study was later conducted by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) in their *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Study (ELEYS)* aimed at identifying core competencies. The ELEYS study identified the following competencies as necessary for effective leadership in programs of early childhood education: identifying and articulating a shared vision; ensuring shared understanding, meaning and goals; effective communication; encouraging reflection; building a learning community; encouraging and facilitating parent and community partnerships; and engaging in the balance of both leading and managing (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). These competencies demonstrate the importance of leaders in early childhood education being able to set a vision and engage in other practices that involve the ability to work with staff, parents, and the community.

In addition, similar to studies conducted in the K-12 setting, research has found that being able to establish working relationships and inspire staff are key characteristics for early childhood education leaders. Bloom (2000) found that effective early childhood leaders demonstrate the following four characteristics: goal oriented, have a clear vision, establish good working relationships with staff, and responsive to parent needs. In addition, according to Fleming and Love (2002), effective leaders of early childhood education programs have the capability to empower staff by means of developing and building relationships with teachers and parents. The findings from these two studies overlap with the findings from studies conducted in K-12, with the exception that leaders of early childhood education programs need to have more frequent interaction with parents than their K-12 counterparts.

There is also a positive relationship between an administrator's leadership style and the school culture in all dimensions of preschool. School culture in preschool is shaped by the mutual interactions between administrators, staff, family, and the environment. Administrators help to shape the school culture by developing the model for values and beliefs; setting the structure; and shaping its symbols, ideologies and discourse. A positive school culture has been found to increase academic success and have an effect on teachers' dedication and their trust in administration, colleagues, and parents (Schein, 2011).

Other key practices that have been identified as essential to early childhood education leaders include an emphasis on the leader's ability to implement strategies to motivate his/her followers. Solly (2003) highlighted the leader's ability to demonstrate enthusiasm, passion, and inspiration as central characteristics in effective leadership styles. In a later study, Whalley (2003) emphasized influence rather than authority as an important element in leadership. This further highlights how important it is that leaders not just manage operations, but also engage with staff to achieve the desired outcomes.

Effective leadership in early childhood education is crucial, and the need has never been greater than at this time of increased accountability and recognition of the value of early education (Talan, 2010; Mitchell, 2002). Evidence of early childhood education benefits has shifted the attention to quality programs and the need for effective leadership. High-quality programs tend to ensure that children are better situated for school readiness.

There is limited research focusing on early childhood education leadership, however, the existing literature demonstrates that effective leadership in early childhood education is in alignment with the practices of transformational leadership, specifically Kouzes and Posner's model. Many of the common core concepts identified in the literature as necessary for effective

leadership focused on the need for the leader to have a vision and develop relationships with staff and parents. These two concepts are related to the practices of *inspire a shared vision*, *enable others to act*, and *encourage the heart* from the Kouzes and Posner's transformational model of leadership. Effective leaders are able to guide and work with staff to accomplish the purpose of early childhood education, which is school readiness.

Effective early childhood education leaders are able to set a clear vision for the program and staff (Bloom, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007; Morgan, 2000). The vision of the leader should be upwards, provide guidance, and benefit the organization as a whole (Neugebauer, 1998). Effective leaders are able to ensure that staff are aware of their role and understand what is expected and how they fit into the vision. In addition, it is the leader's responsibility to help staff set goals and help them reach their goals by providing the necessary tools and information needed. Leaders who are able to see this relationship are able to lead in an early childhood education setting.

In summary, effective leaders are able to establish and maintain working relationships with the people in their organization and the families of the children served (Bloom, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007; Morgan, 2000; Solly, 2003; Whalley, 2003; Zembert, 2011). This includes the leader's ability to support and inspire staff, which are important concepts in leadership of early childhood education programs (Neugerberger, 1998). A leader who motivates staff and places a high emphasis on relationships is able to obtain results. This is due to the message of confidence in the ability of staff that the leader demonstrates. Time is spent on working with staff to accomplish goals and the vision, rather than devoting time to checking on teachers to ensure they are performing well. The supportive role is not limited to inspiration, but also includes the ability to provide staff with the resources, feedback, and input necessary for problem solving.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explored the perspectives of current Head Start directors and teachers regarding ideal leadership practices. As a result, a qualitative study to explore and investigate this topic was deemed the most appropriate. Holloway and Biley (2011), refer to qualitative inquiry as "the most humanistic and person-centered way of discovering thoughts and actions of human beings" (p. 974). The use of a qualitative study allows the research questions to be further investigated by means of hearing the voices of the leaders and teachers in the field regarding the manner in which effective leadership is defined and identify effective leadership practices identified.

Data were collected by means of interviews and completion of a demographic questionnaire and an adapted version of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) survey. The rationale for using interviews as the means for data collection was to obtain open-ended responses to the questions. This approach provides rich thick data and allows for data to be collected from the participants' points of view and in their natural setting. Qualitative research makes stories interesting to others by having the researcher collect, transform, and interpret data (Holloway & Biley, 2011). In addition, a questionnaire was incorporated into this study in an attempt to obtain additional information regarding the manner in which directors and teachers in the field of Head Start perceive certain leadership practices. The integration of the questionnaire allowed for a greater understanding of the leadership practices that Head Start staff perceived to be essential for ideal leadership.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. The logic of qualitative research is concerned with an in-depth understanding of small samples (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). It is common for qualitative researchers to use purposeful sampling in the selection process in an attempt to gain further understanding and in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon. In order to do this, researchers intentionally select sites and individuals (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Creswell (2007) explains that purposeful sampling is appropriate for qualitative research because it provides a means of selecting the study's sites and participants because they possess an understanding of the information needed.

This approach allowed for the intentional selection of various individuals from 6 different Head Start programs within Southern California. A purposeful sample of 15 staff was obtained, 6 directors and 9 teachers, to participate in this study. The selection criteria required that each participant for this study have a minimum of 3 years experience with Head Start. This criterion was selected to reduce the likelihood that staff would provide testimonies without sufficient experience in the Head Start setting.

Data were collected within a 4-month time period and analyzed simultaneously using a constant comparative approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analysis included the transcription of audio-recorded interviews and the coding of field notes and completed questionnaires and surveys. A coding system was developed and refined to facilitate review and sorting of the data. Data collected was analyzed using both open and focused coding. In the open coding process, the transcripts and field notes were read several times to increase familiarity with the data. During the focused coding process, the transcripts and field notes were reviewed for special notation of key concepts and/or topics that were visible from the data. First, the themes captured the concepts that were most cited throughout the data and provided an in-depth understanding and response to the study's research question. The themes were further analyzed in accordance with the five leadership practices cited by Kouzes and Posner's (2003) model of transformational leadership. Data not fitting into this coding scheme were reanalyzed and determined to be either divergent data or categorized as miscellaneous data. The final stage of the data analysis included summing up the findings from the study and validating the results.

## RESULTS

### Research Question 1: Directors Perceptions of Ideal Leadership Practices

*Staff Motivation: Leaders as Cheerleaders.* Every single director in this study agreed that staff motivation is of high importance for ideal leadership in Head Start. An effective Head Start leader was described as an individual that is able to motivate staff to achieve the vision of the program. A couple of the directors, specifically mentioned the need for administrators to be "cheerleaders" in order to motivate staff. For example, "We are cheerleaders, and our main goal—you know, most of our people, we hire them because they're skilled. So I don't usually—our job shouldn't be to train that much really. It's building the skill." Participants shared that providing positive feedback to staff was important to increase staff motivation, and described the impact that this has on the children and families served.

Many of the participants also made specific reference to praise as an important strategy for staff motivation. This included mention of both verbal and written praise during several of

the interviews. The importance of providing staff with praise was shared by one of the director's who mentioned:

“People forget how verbal, how far verbal or written praise goes. Sometimes we forget because we are so busy and bogged down. As a director, there's so much I have to do. So many different jobs . . . There's so much responsibility, and I'm doing so much that sometimes I forget to give praise where praise is due.”

He further elaborated that providing praise is a very simple strategy that potentially has a great impact on staff.

*Vision.* Having a clear vision was identified as a key concept necessary for ideal leadership. A clear vision helps to ensure that desired goals are met, and that all staff are aware of the goals. Developing and maintaining a vision is a critical aspect for school improvement and school leadership. Having a vision was a theme that was evident in four of the interviews. For example, one of the directors stated, “There has to be a vision. There has to be a direction. There has to be a leader. That leader needs strong people to support the work and to build a team.” This director made reference to the importance of a leader having a vision to guide the program. This director also made reference to the vision as a guiding source and a change agent. This same sentiment was stated by another director who shared the important role that having a vision has on leadership in early childhood education:

You need to have a clear vision of what you want for the program. People have to buy into the vision, be part of the vision. It has to be a collective vision but you definitely, as part of the vision, need to know what you stand for so that others know.

This director's response indicates the importance of the leader first and foremost having and understanding of the vision of the program, and also the importance of having staff as part of the vision. This same idea was further reiterated by another director who mentioned, “I think that the best way to have a shared vision with staff is when they are part of the vision. They are part of developing it and maintaining it.” This director shared her feelings of how critical it is to have staff be a part of the vision as a component of developing a shared vision.

Another director shared the importance of keeping the vision of the program in mind when making decisions. “My vision is of setting goals . . . with the driving force always being what is in the best interest of the children and families.” A vision was not only deemed necessary to guide the program, but also seen as one of the key channels that drive the decision making for the programs.

*Collaboration.* Collaboration was identified as an important concept for leadership in Head Start programs. The responses identified the need for Head Start staff to work collaboratively in order to meet the vision of the program. Several of the directors mentioned that collaboration was instrumental in order to get the work done, since the leader was not able to accomplish this on their own. One director, specifically mentioned the following: “When I first met my staff, I talked to them about the fact that I can't do this job alone, but instead that I am going to involve them and am going to need their help.” Collaboration was described as a necessary action related to leadership in Head Start for staying connected, working towards a

common goal, and making decisions.

Likewise, another director discussed the concept of collaboration and indicated that being able to collaborate is necessary for ideal leadership in Head Start because it allows for all staff to work towards a common goal despite being located at different sites.

“We have the Head Start Office and then we have 11 Head Start sites, so we're not all located at the same place. So even though we're at 12 different locations and some work in the morning and some work in the afternoon, it's important to feel that we're all part of the same team, going in the same direction. So that's certainly important. Again, kind of that teamness, inclusiveness, certainly people feeling valued. Again, the relationships, we're very big on relationships. . . . Meanwhile working together toward the common goal of helping, providing the best possible services to the children and families.”

The set up of Head Start programs is unique in comparison to schools in the K-12 setting because classroom sites are not all located on one campus, but instead throughout the community the program serves. As a result, the need for collaboration is of even greater importance in this type of set-up, because it allows for leaders to be aware of the overall program despite not being present on the same campus. Another director referenced collaboration as a necessary characteristic of leadership, and shared the importance of involving all stakeholders. “Collaboration is important when working with staff, parents, and the community. Collaboration is one of my core values because I love to engage others in the process and see how resources can be shared.” This director referred to collaboration as vital to maximizing resources and the inclusion of all key stakeholders as vital for achieving their mission.

In summary, directors agreed on the need for all staff to get the work done. The practice of collaboration was shared to be necessary in order to accomplish the vision and make the best decisions for the overall program. Establishing and maintaining working relationships with staff was seen as instrumental for collaborative practices within the Head Start program.

## Research Question 2: Teachers Perceptions of Ideal Leadership Practices

*Encouragement.* Every single teacher in this study agreed that motivation is of high importance for ideal leadership in Head Start. An effective Head Start leader was described as a director that is able to motivate staff to achieve the vision of the program and feel valued. Participants shared that providing positive feedback to staff was important to increase staff motivation and described the impact that this has on the children and families served. Teachers shared that their sense of feeling valued will trickle down to how they approach their work in serving the children in the program.

Staff motivation was agreed to be very important. Statements such as “It’s everything, its absolutely everything,” “It’s of high importance. I think it’s always needed,” “Motivation is key,” and “If staff is motivated, they will enjoy coming to work” were just some of the responses from the teachers when asked about the importance of staff motivation.

Several of the participants also described the importance motivation has on the overall Head Start program. Many of the participants referred to the importance of having staff motivated because it impacts the children and families served. “Very important to keep the ball rolling. It’s important for staff to feel good about the work they do, and this will reflect in the

work they do.” Another teacher further emphasized the importance of leadership by sharing that the lack of staff motivation could impact the services to children in the program. “I tell my staff all the time right now, you know what, if you don’t feel good at work then our children aren’t going to feel good. It’s just that simple.”

Many of the teachers also referred to praise as one of the important strategies for staff motivation. This included mention of both verbal and written praise during several of the interviews. “It is important and, as I just said, telling us, ‘Oh, you guys are doing a good job.’ ” This teacher shared that, although she is there to fulfill her responsibilities, receiving praise is key to motivation of staff. “For instance, we need to be recognized. I think it’s terrible to go into a job where you’re constantly, ‘Okay, I hear you. I’m working my hiney off.’ Where’s ‘Thank you for doing a good job. I appreciate it?’” This teacher shared simple phrases that a director could use to praise staff and the impact that this has on increasing teacher satisfaction. Another teacher mentioned the importance of providing feedback, but to equally remember to include feedback that is not only constructive but also acknowledges areas of strength. She mentioned:

“I think more of encouragement, like, you know they say, they review our paperwork all the time and they, you know, they give us feedback on what we should fix and, what we’re missing. But I think they should do an equal amount of, like, acknowledgment, of like, oh wow I saw that you did this and oh wow, I noticed you implemented this on your lesson plans, great idea, great strategies, or you know.”

This teacher indicated that providing feedback that highlights areas of strengths can be very encouraging for staff. Yet another teacher reiterated this by stating, “Saying thank you, emailing, or maybe a phone call recognizing the job that we do... I think it’s just that, acknowledging and saying thank you.”

*Be Involved: Importance of Leader Visibility.* Visibility of the leader was mentioned as a key strategy for ideal leadership of Head Start programs. This was an area that several of the teachers mentioned as needing to be strengthened in Head Start directors. Six out of nine teachers were firm in stating that Head Start directors need to be more visible at the classroom level in order to stay connected to the program and increase teacher satisfaction.

One of the teacher participants specifically stated that directors as leaders of the Head Start program need to be more visible in the classroom:

“I think that as a leader, [the director] should be able to go into the classroom to observe, give criticism in a nice way—constructive criticism. Be involved. Come out of the office. Turn the computer off. Get in the classroom and deal with the children. Remember where we came from. If it wasn’t for the children we wouldn’t have a job... stay connected.”

This teacher during the interview acknowledged that directors have many duties and responsibilities to attend to, but that visiting the classrooms was also important. She shared that by means of visiting the classroom the Head Start director can see firsthand the work that is being done with the children in the program.

Another teacher in this study referred to the need for the Head Start director to be visible before parents as well. This teacher mentioned that “there are years, complete years that they [parents] don’t know them [the director]. They don’t even know who they are... It would be

nice, yeah, at the first part of the [parent] meeting that the director introduce and present themselves.” She referred to the need for directors to not only visit the classrooms, but also participate in parent meetings in order to know the needs of the parents and listen to their concerns. This was seen as another means for helping the director stay connected to the community, children, and families that are served by the program.

Several other teachers shared that visibility of the director at the classroom level is important for teacher motivation and to see the work that is done at the classroom level. One of the teachers specifically mentioned that directors should “be visible in the classrooms, be actively involved.”

*Lead by Example.* Leading by example was another practice that teachers considered important for ideal leadership of Head Start programs. Leading by example was considered crucial for being able to inspire a shared vision with staff and as a motivating factor. A leader who believes in the vision and behaves in a manner that reflects that was seen as important. “[The director] has to be an example, a hard worker. *This is what I want us to do. This is what I expect us to do, and this is our goal by the end of the year.* So when you set goals in your vision, you have to also have that instilled in your own personnel.” This teacher made specific reference to the important role that directors have in modeling the behavior they expect from their staff. This teacher shared that staff look to the director to determine certain behaviors. Similarly, another teacher shared, “I think it helps people see the vision by seeing an example of the vision, working together and having conversations.” This teacher shared the important role that a director has in being a role model and how staff look to the director to assess if they believe in the vision. Yet another teacher shared that “Leaders need to be motivated themselves, positive and knowledgeable of child development. At meetings leaders can share this feeling with staff to inspire them.” This teacher, also expressed the importance of directors modeling the behavior that is expected of staff in order to have all staff believe in the vision of the program.

Another relevant concept that was shared by teachers regarding the concept of leading by example is the importance of follow-through. Teachers mentioned that it is important for directors be able to follow through on ideas, promises, and concerns. For example, one teacher mentioned the “importance of two-way communication and follow-through on concerns.” This teacher shared that it is important for directors to follow through on concerns they mentioned they would address. Likewise, another teacher elaborated this concept further by stating, “I think that it’s important that Head Start leaders are able to walk the talk... [if you don’t,] people that you work for will not respect you for a very long time.” This teacher made reference to the importance of directors following through on their verbal commitments to staff. For teachers it was important for directors to follow through in order to obtain respect from staff.

*Professional Development.* Professional development opportunities were a request that was repeatedly shared by teachers as a means to be able to maximize their potential. Six teachers shared that having opportunities for professional development allowed staff to gain skills that could enhance the work that they currently do. Although, Head Start regulations require teachers to receive a minimum of 15 hours per year of professional development, teachers shared the need to have these courses tailored to their specific needs. “Attending workshops because they will help us meet the goals that we want to attain and areas that we have goals for.” This teacher referred to the need for professional development to not only meet her needs to enhance her skills, but also to meet the goals of her professional development plan.

Another teacher referred to the need for ongoing professional development opportunities in order to learn new ideas and strategies to use in the classroom. Teachers indicated that having continuous opportunities to attend trainings and workshops was an area that was needed in order to enhance their classroom instruction.

### Research Question 3: Comparison of Perceptions

*Interview Findings.* The interviews with teachers and directors revealed important practices for ideal leadership of Head Start programs. Both groups described their responses from personal experiences and shared practices they considered necessary for ideal leadership in Head Start. The responses from the directors included many of their current practices, while teachers shared practices that are currently implemented and/or that they would like implemented. The response from both groups included some similarities but also some differences.

Some of the similarities in the response of both teachers and directors included the need for staff motivation, the shift towards school readiness, and the need to have a vision. Teachers and directors both shared the importance of staff motivation. Directors shared the need to have administrators and leaders be “cheerleaders” for staff in an attempt to increase motivation and job satisfaction. Teachers also shared this need to have directors motivate staff in order to increase teacher satisfaction and have a sense of being valued.

Another similarity was regarding school readiness. Both teachers and directors shared how school readiness has transformed Head Start programs. Teachers and directors agreed on how Head Start is now more geared to preparing children academically. For example, one of the teachers has “seen many changes, including in academics. Head Start is now more like kindergarten; there is more focus on academics.” A director reiterated this concept, stating, “I’ve seen Head Start move towards school readiness.”

Lastly, both groups agreed on the importance of having a vision. Teachers and directors agreed on how vital it is for the director of the program to have a vision. Directors referred more to the importance of developing a vision, while teachers referred to the importance of having directors model the vision.

There were also certain differences that were captured in the responses of the teachers and directors. Teachers had a tendency to discuss more of their experiences related to the impact of the Head Start program on the children and families served, while directors discussed more of the program operations. For example, one teacher stated, “In terms of my experience as my journey, I think it has been very rewarding. I love working with the families because you get to see a lot, you get to see the benefits of our program.” On the other hand, when directors were asked to share their journey in Head Start, many responded with responses regarding program operations that included the budget, compliance, systems, and services.

Another example that demonstrates the difference in the responses was in the manner in which directors and teachers defined the role of leadership in early childhood education. Teachers described the role of leadership as something big, while directors described it using more concrete terms, where without effective leadership the program would fall apart. Teachers described the need for leadership by stating that leadership was the “brain of the computer,” another teacher referred to leadership as impacting “everything from the macro to the micro,” while directors were more inclined to discuss the impact that lack of leadership can have on a

program. For example, one director mentioned, “Without strong leadership you can’t flourish.”

Another noted difference was in the manner in which staff motivation was discussed. Although both groups shared the need for staff motivation, directors also shared the difficulty that their role has sometimes with personnel-related issues. Three of the directors mentioned that handling personnel issues is one of the most difficult aspects of the position.

*Adapted Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) Findings.* All of the participants in this study completed the adapted version of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). An analysis of the completed surveys provides a better understanding of which leadership practices are perceived to be the most important by teachers and directors. *Model the way* was the practice rated as the most relevant for ideal leadership in head start by teachers and *challenge the process* as the least relevant. On the other hand, directors rated the practice of *Enable Others to Act* as the most relevant for ideal leadership in Head Start, while the practice of *inspire a shared vision* was rated the least important.

The results of the adapted leadership practices inventory (LPI) demonstrate the desired ideal leadership practices of Head Start directors and teachers. In review of the results of how teachers and directors scored the LPI, there were some distinct differences in the practices that were considered the most important for ideal leadership. In addition, another noted difference with the scoring of the adapted LPI was that directors had an overall tendency to score the LPI higher compared to the teachers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

The results from this research study have several implications on recommended practices for current and aspiring leaders in ECE. The results revealed practices in alignment with the practices of transformational leadership. The results from this study also confirm the importance of developing relationships as an aspect of effective leadership. These practices are not only in alignment with Kouzes and Posner’s (2003, 2007) model of transformational leadership but also emphasize the leader’s ability to establish a relationship with staff by means of communication, providing feedback, listening, and sharing information. Further, the leader has the ability to guide and influence the vision of the program by means of the relationship that he or she establishes with the staff. In alignment with the results of this study, the following recommendations made:

1. *Model the Way.* Directors should ensure to lead by example and follow through on all promises and concerns in order to earn and sustain credibility with staff (Kouzes and Posner, 2003, 2007). In accordance with this practice, it is recommended that directors be aware that staff are observing their actions, and as a result engage in authentic and reliable behavior that exemplifies behavior desired from their staff. Directors can engage in acts that are not solely administrative but also more hands-on with staff. An example of such behavior includes providing coaching to teachers on desired interactions with children. This can be accomplished during classroom visits, an area that was identified as a needed practice by teachers in this study.
2. *Inspire a Shared Vision.* Teachers and directors both referred to the importance of having a vision as a needed practice for ideal leadership. An effective leader understands the

importance of establishing a clear vision. In accordance with this practice, directors should be sure to have a vision and be able to motivate staff to be a part of that vision. Directors should be able to envision the future of the program and enlist others in the common vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

3. *Enable Others to Act.* Collaboration was an identified practice for ideal leadership of programs. In alignment with this practice it is recommended that directors encourage collaboration, build teams, and empower their staff (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, 2007). This is also important because of the variety of comprehensive services that are provided to children that require collaboration among the various service area disciplines.
4. *Encourage the Heart.* Staff motivation and encouragement was an area that was regarded as highly important by both directors and teachers. This includes providing staff with praise and appreciation (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, 2007). Directors should provide staff with feedback and praise on their areas of strengths. Teachers made reference to the value and impact that giving praise and showing appreciation has on staff and overall program morale. Additionally, this study revealed the importance of visibility. Teachers mentioned the importance of directors being visible at the classroom level in order to stay connected to the program and make decisions based on these observations. As a result, it is recommended that directors integrate classroom visits as a part of their normal routine.
5. *Challenge the Process.* Professional development is helpful in enhancing the knowledge and skills of practitioners, as well as keeping staff abreast of changes in the field. In accordance with the findings from this study, directors should be sure to provide teachers and staff with ongoing professional development opportunities. Teachers should be provided with professional development to assist them in becoming effective in their role, remain up-to-date on trends, and learn best practices.

## CONCLUSION

This study was prompted by the limited amount of research by scholars and educators devoted to the leadership practices in early childhood education. The purpose of this study was to investigate ideal leadership practices of Head Start programs from the perspectives of current staff in the field. With the shifting policy, understanding leadership of Head Start and early childhood education programs is critical to increasing quality and expanding access to early childhood education. The need to develop strong leadership in early childhood education is of great significance in order to improve the quality of services delivered to children and families (Mujis et al., 2004; Nupponen, 2005). Specifically, changes in accountability, including in Head Start, require that programs demonstrate the delivery of quality services in order to avoid losing funding. As a result, understanding ideal leadership is vital in order to ensure that quality services are delivered consistently and to accomplish the goal of school readiness.

A key component of this research study was to identify ideal leadership practices of Head Start programs through the lens of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are agents of change who are good role models, able to lead by example, create and articulate a clear vision, empower and inspire others to meet goals, and behave in a manner that makes followers trust them. Transformational leadership is an effective approach in the field of education due to the support that leaders provide teaching staff and the impact that it has on student achievement. Further, transformational leaders are able to understand and value the importance of relationships

in the accomplishment of goals and are able to inspire staff to adopt a desired vision. In the educational setting, transformational leaders are able to intrinsically motivate staff to meet the needs of students and focus on student achievement. The results of this study supported the need for transformational leadership in Head Start programs.

This study revealed the ideal leadership practices to be in alignment with the practices of transformational leadership. The results of this study are important due to the shift in attention and policy regarding expanding access to quality early childhood education programs for all children, with particular importance for children of disadvantaged backgrounds, including the Head Start constituency. This has resulted in greater accountability being placed on Head Start programs to deliver quality services in order to maintain funding. Ideal leadership practices are needed to meet the needs of the changing expectations of Head Start programs.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to assist me in collecting data related to my dissertation. I am conducting a research study entitled *Leadership in Head Start Settings*. This interview will assist me to gain further insight and understanding on how ideal practices are defined and to assess common themes and patterns related to leadership in Head Start programs. The data collected will remain confidential and your name and the name of your organization will be maintained in total confidentiality. Your participation in this interview is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point without any penalty. Participation in this interview should take approximately 60 minutes.

\* For teaching staff please note that this is not an evaluation of your program and/or director. The goal is to develop a further understanding of ideal leadership practices in Head Start.

### *Interview Questions:*

1. 1. How long have you been in the field of Early Childhood Education?
  - How long have you been in your current position?
1. 2. Tell me about your journey so far in the world of Head Start?
  - Is there a metaphor for your journey? From when you started to now?
1. 3. What role does leadership have in Early Childhood Education?
2. 4. How would you describe ideal leadership in Head Start program?
  - What are some of the important principles and values that guide effective leadership?
1. 5. How can leaders inspire a shared vision of all staff?
  - What are some of the specific strategies that can be implemented?
1. 6. How important is staff motivation?
  - What are some of the specific strategies that can be used to motivate staff?
  - How can leaders/Director's increase teacher satisfaction?
  - Can you provide me with an example of when you have been motivated by a leader?
1. 7. How would you like decisions to be made in your program?
  - What involvement should staff have?
  - What involvement should teachers have?
1. 8. How can a leader/director challenge staff to maximize their potential?
  - What are specific strategies that can do this?
  - Can you provide me with a specific example?
1. 9. What lessons of leadership have you learned thus far?

APPENDIX B: ADAPTED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES INVENTORY

Leadership Practices Inventory Questionnaire Adapted Version  
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In the questionnaire below please indicate to what extent you rate each of the statements to be important for effective leadership in the Head Start setting. Choose the response number that best applies to each statement and circle it under that statement.

- |                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1= Almost Never    | 6=Sometimes       |
| 2= Rarely          | 7=Fairly Often    |
| 3= Seldom          | 8=Usually         |
| 4= Once in a while | 9=Very Frequently |
| 5= Occasionally    | 10=Always         |

1. 1. Sets a personal example of what he/she expects of others.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 2. Talks about future trends that will influence how our work gets done.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 3. Seeks out challenging opportunities that test his/her own skills and abilities.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 4. Develops cooperative relationships among the people he/she works with.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 5. Praises people for a job well done.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 6. Spend time and energy making certain that the people he/she works with adhere to the principals and standards we have agreed on.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 7. Describes a compelling image of what our future could be like.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 8. Challenges people to try out new and innovative ways to do their work.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 9. Actively listens to diverse points of view.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 10. Makes it a point to let people know about his/her confidence in their abilities.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 11. Follows through on promises and commitments that he/she makes.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 12. Appeals to others to share an exciting dream of the future.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 13. Searches outside the formal boundaries of his/her organization for innovative ways to improve what we do.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 14. Treats others with dignity and respect.  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1. 15. Makes sure that people are creatively rewarded for their contributions to the success of our projects.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 16. Asks for feedback on how his/her actions affect other people's performance.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 17. Shows others how their long term interests can be realized by enlisting in a common vision.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 18. Asks "what can we learn?" when things don't go as expected.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 19. Supports the decisions that people make on their own.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 20. Publicly recognizes people who exemplify commitment to shared values.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 21. Builds consensus around a common set of values for running our organization.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 22. Paints the "big picture" of what we aspire to accomplish.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 23. Makes certain that we set achievable goals, makes concrete plans, and establish measureable milestones for the projects and programs that we work on.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 24. Gives people a great deal of freedom and choice in deciding how to do their work.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 25. Finds ways to celebrate accomplishments.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 26. Is clear about his/her philosophy of leadership.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 27. Speaks with a genuine conviction about the higher meaning and purpose of our work.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 28. Experiments and takes risks, even when there is a chance of failure.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 29. Ensures that people grow in their jobs by learning new skills and developing themselves.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1. 30. Gives the members of the team lots of appreciation and support for their contributions.  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

## APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

### Demographic Questionnaire Leadership in Head Start Settings

Please complete this brief questionnaire.

1. 1. Position title: \_\_\_\_\_

1. 2. Years in Head Start: \_\_\_\_\_

1. 3. Years in current position: \_\_\_\_\_

1. 4. Highest degree earned: \_\_\_\_\_

1. 5. Please list any Certificate/Permit/Credential: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_