RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Ideal Leadership in Head Start Programs

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The field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) has risen to the top of the national educational agenda as a way to overcome the achievement gap and assure that all children learn. With increased recognition comes greater accountability. The field of ECE, particularly Head Start is under scrutiny to produce measureable results. Leadership is crucial to assure both commitment to the holistic goals of ECE and the requirements of accountability. The first step is to determine the views of those who know best, those who are working closely with children. The purpose of this paper is to report research on how current Head Start directors and teachers define effective leadership practices and strategies. These practices will help leaders and aspiring leaders in ECE settings to be able to motivate teachers and gain the necessary tools to lead in a time of measureable results.

The field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) has risen to the top of the national educational agenda as a way to overcome the achievement gap and assure that all children learn. President Obama has enacted a series of new investments to establish high-quality preschool for every child in America. This is because of the overwhelming research that demonstrates the short and long term benefits associated with participation in ECE programs. ECE programs have also been found to be instrumental in preparing children to be school ready and in closing the achievement gap (Business Roundtable, 2012; Hughs,2010; Lambert, 2003; Martin; 2010). However, with increased recognition comes greater accountability. The field of ECE is under greater scrutiny to produce measureable results, particularly Head Start programs. Leadership is crucial to assure both commitment to the holistic goals of ECE and the requirements of accountability. As leaders seek to determine the factors that lead to the overall quality of early childhood programs it is necessary to focus on effective leadership strategies to successfully compete in a time of increased accountability. The first step is to determine the views of those who know best, those who are working closely with children. The purpose of this report is to report research on how current Head Start directors and teachers define effective leadership practices and strategies. These practices will help leaders and aspiring leaders in ECE settings to be able to motivate teachers and gain the necessary tools to lead in a time of measureable results.

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. In ECE there is a close connection to families as partners in the education of children, there is a developmental approach in a more personal atmosphere that attends to the whole child, and in the case of Head Start programs, there are heavy demands upon administrators to ensure that programs are following rules and regulations. Given these unique conditions of ECE, this article will explore 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.

Research was conducted at six Head Start programs in Southern California. Data were collected by means of interviews and completion of a demographic questionnaire and an adapted version of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). The findings revealed ideal leadership practices in alignment with the practices of transformational leadership. Directors identified staff motivation, having a vision, and collaboration as ideal leadership practices, and teachers identified encouragement, leader visibility, leading by example and professional development as the ideal practices for effective leadership. 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.

IDEAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

All of the directors in the study agreed on the high level of importance of staff motivation. They described an ideal leader as an individual who is able to motivate staff to accomplish the vision of the program. They said that effective directors are "cheerleaders" to their staff. This included praise and providing positive feedback to staff on their work. A couple of the directors also shared recommended strategies to encourage staff. These included making time to meet with staff on an individual basis and taking the time for recognition and acknowledgement.

Directors also shared that effective leadership includes having a vision to guide the program. Several of the directors reported that having a vision is a necessary practice for ideal leadership because it provides direction. Leaders need not only to have a vision but also be able to have staff buy-in to the vision and be the driving force behind decisions made for the program.

Additionally, directors shared the importance of collaboration in being able to meet the vision of the program. This was seen as instrumental because it allows for all staff to be involved in the service delivery. Being able to develop working relationships was also seen as a key element of collaboration because it allows for a cohesive process to get the work done.

The interviews with teachers revealed ideal leadership practices to include; encouragement, visibility, leading by example, and opportunities for professional development. All teachers shared that encouragement was a needed practice of ideal leadership. Receiving praise and feedback on their performance, along with "thank you", were shared as being important to increase staff motivation. Every single teacher interviewed indicated that receiving positive feedback was needed for staff motivation and the impact that this would have on not

only their performance but also how this would "trickle down" to how they would approach their work at the classroom level.

Teachers also shared the importance of visibility from the director as crucial for ideal leadership. This was indicated to be an area that needs to be strengthened. Teachers stated that having directors be more visible and involved in the classroom level is vital in order to stay connected to the program and increase teacher satisfaction. The teachers in this study recognized the multitude of duties that directors have but stated that it is essential for directors to visit the classrooms in order to be aware of what occurs at the classroom level, see the children and families that are served by the program and be able to make decisions based on their observations.

Leading by example, was another practice that was shared by teachers. Teachers shared the importance of directors behaving in a manner that demonstrates they believe in the vision and to follow through on verbal promises. It was indicated that directors need to be able to behave in a manner that demonstrates they believe in the vision and how this is transferred on to staff. In addition, teachers stated that directors should follow through on verbal promises and concerns in order to obtain respect from their staff.

The last practice that teachers reveled for ideal leadership was the need for ongoing professional development opportunities. Several teachers indicated that having opportunities to participate in professional development was vital for to maximizing their potential. Teachers requested that professional development that is tailored to meet their needs be provided to them in order to enhance their skills. Professional development was stated to be vital for ideal leadership because it allows staff to learn best practices and remain abreast trends in the field.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTIONERS

The views of directors and teachers in this research study have several implications for current and aspiring leaders in ECE. Their definitions of ideal practices were in alignment with transformational leadership and confirm the importance of developing relationships as an aspect of effective leadership. Kouzes and Posner's (2003, 2007) model of transformational leadership captures their views because it emphasizes 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.

There are several recommendations that follow from this study:

1. Directors should lead by example and follow through on all promises to address concerns and earn and sustain credibility with staff. Because teachers are observing the actions of directors, they must engage in authentic and reliable behavior that lives up to staff expectations. Furthermore, 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 for 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. 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.

3. Directors should encourage collaboration, build teams, and empower staff. 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. Most importantly, directors need to establish collaborative practices with the local school districts in order to ensure children are school ready.

4. Staff motivation and encouragement were regarded as highly important by both directors and teachers. 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. Directors can integrate classroom visits as a part of their normal routine. An effective leader monitors performance expectations, builds commitment, enthusiasm and excitement (Hawley & Rollie, 2002). Directors should spend time visiting the classrooms, interacting with children and families, and observing instruction. Directors build trust through the supporting and nurturing of teachers and allowing relationships to grow and develop. This can also allow directors an opportunity to provide teachers with feedback, including praise.

5. Professional development is helpful in enhancing the knowledge and skills of practitioners, as well as keeping staff abreast of changes in the field. 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. Developing skills in these areas will enrich the quality of the program and therefore increase the quality of experiences for the children who attend.

These recommendations provide a critical road map for leaders to guide successful Head Start programs. Lead by example, establish a clear vision, collaborate, motivate, and develop the capacity of teachers. This kind of leadership is important for schools at all levels of education, but it is perhaps most crucial at the very beginning of a child's educational journey.

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