

# Research Notes

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## Portrait of Leadership in an Early Childhood Learning Organization

Early childhood programs are subject to increasing expectations for staff qualifications and greater accountability for child and program outcomes. *Roots and Wings: Portrait of Leadership in an Early Childhood Learning Organization*<sup>1</sup> is a case study of leadership in a community-based early childhood program which effectively blends public funding for Head Start, child care, and pre-kindergarten to provide a program of excellence. Findings from this study shed new light on the leadership principles and practices that are effective in addressing the many adaptive challenges embedded in the current culture of change.

### Methodology

As part of a professional development initiative in Chicago, the subject of this case study, the child care program at Erie Neighborhood House (Erie), was assessed in 2002 and 2006 utilizing valid and reliable measures of the learning environment, teacher-child interactions, program administrative practices, and organizational climate. This program demonstrated the capacity to sustain a level of quality over a four-year period that promotes good developmental outcomes for children, strong partnerships with families and the community, and a positive work environment.

Social science portraiture was the methodology used to collect, code, and analyze the data, as well as to create a portrait revealing the essential “goodness or effectiveness” of this exemplary program.<sup>2</sup> Interviews with a dozen stakeholders situated in roles across the organization, observation of group meetings, document reviews, and participants’ graphic representations of leadership at Erie all contributed to an understanding of the leadership principles and practices in this program. Authenticity was derived from triangulating the data. Emergent themes were included in the final portrait only if they were indicated in the words and representations of multiple participants and were supported by documents or observations.

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### Findings

Analysis of the data drawn from the interviews, observations, graphic representations, and document reviews identified four themes pertaining to effective leadership principles and practices.

**Pass the Credit On** was a phrase commonly used to describe the servant leadership style of the child care program director. *“I think the leader should take credit for as little as possible...pass the credit on,”* said one administrative team member at Erie. When interviewed, the director said, *“I ask a lot of questions. How can I help you with this? What is it you need from me? These kinds of questions really are getting at the issue of how I can support the person.”*

Similarly, the concept of leadership being reflected in the support of staff or service to the organization was present in the stories told by various members of the staff. One teacher described in her hand-drawn sketch of leadership at Erie: *“This is me and my team...tight rope walkers. Sometimes it’s like ‘whoa’ we are wavering...with an issue about a parent or a child...but we always have this little safety net beneath us. We have our own ideas and implement them in the classroom, and know that if we do that, we are still going to be supported.”*

**Don’t Ask Permission...Ask Forgiveness** was an often repeated phrase of the child care program director. *“Let’s just do it! And if they tell us we can’t, we will stop.”* Advocacy on behalf of what is best for children, families, or the child care program was the result of this assertive and autonomous stance. It was clear from words and actions that the members of the child care staff also felt empowered to advocate for what they believed. One lead teacher in a preschool classroom attributed her decision to stay at Erie (she has the qualifications to teach in a public school setting) to the autonomy she experienced. *“I can create the curriculum in my classroom...that is very important, that’s the number one thing that is important to me. Here I can do what I think is important as opposed to what somebody above me says I must do.”*

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*Leadership is a Journey* describes a developmental path to professional competence. Throughout the interviews, the leadership journey was often depicted as making connections to the big picture of early care and education across program sectors as well as to other leaders in the field. For example, the child care program director described guiding her program through NAEYC accreditation as critical to knowing herself as a leader. *“I began going to national conferences and meeting with other directors...and realized this is the big time. This is where we’re talking about knowing what best practices are for the field.”*

Reflective practice was another marker on the leadership journey. One teacher shared her internal struggle with the new emphasis on professional teaching qualifications. *“I am only halfway toward my bachelor’s. I have worked very hard to get where I am at. I always valued experience more than formal education and now, having some formal education under my belt, I really struggle to marry both together...While I can see the value of both, I find myself having conversations with people who come here right out of school...They have a lot of information...but don’t understand the life space that they have to marry with the education.”*

*“Pass the Rose”* is the name of a ritual of appreciation conducted at each monthly staff meeting that involves passing a rose from person to person, each person sharing something positive about someone else on the team. *“The idea is to affirm each other. Let’s talk about what went well and how people do it.”*

### **From Principles to Practice**

Leadership principles are the mental models—personal dominance, interpersonal influence, or relational dialogue—by which organizational stakeholders make sense of leadership.<sup>3</sup> The early childhood leadership at Erie is understood by the full range of stakeholders as emanating from the principles of interpersonal influence and relational dialogue, the two leadership principles from which an organization is most likely to succeed at meeting adaptive challenge. Leadership practices address how the work of leadership actually gets done. This portrait’s emergent themes reveal four leadership practices that are consistently associated with the early childhood leadership at Erie by the broad range of stakeholders: collaboration and shared decision making, open communication, self-awareness and reflection, and mentoring.

A particularly noteworthy observation was made during a one-day administrative team retreat. The researcher noted how the meeting entailed time for presentation of new information, brainstorming of ideas, dialogue before decision making, reflection, and increasing self-awareness. No one person facilitated the retreat as leadership shifted seamlessly with different people taking responsibility for leading an item on the agenda. This retreat provided a condensed view—a virtual snapshot—of an early childhood learning organization. In the course of a single day, the 15-member leadership team embraced change, engaged in systems thinking, and demonstrated shared leadership. The team discussed the possibility of making positive choices in the face of externally imposed changes. *“We don’t want to focus on the good old days, and how things used to be, and in the process lose our energy to deal with the present. We need to ask ourselves what it is about what we are doing right here, right now that we feel good about, that pleases us, and look for that ingredient. It is the now that needs attention.”*

### **Conclusion**

*Roots and Wings* describes the culture of growth and professional development at Erie Neighborhood House. There is a quality of optimism among the staff—a can-do attitude—that seems to be connected to knowing that there is “room to grow” within the organization. An agency administrator describes the child care program as a *“grow-your-own model of leadership development...leading everyone involved to become better at what they do...an opportunity for some of them to take leadership positions.”* Indeed, three of the five child care administrative staff interviewed started out as assistant teachers.

The findings of this portrait study reveal an early childhood learning organization that embraces change, promotes individual and organizational learning, demonstrates reciprocal learning and leading, and is characterized by a culture of deep appreciation and support.

1. Talan, T. (2007). *Roots and wings: Portrait of leadership in an early childhood learning organization*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, National-Louis University, Wheeling, Illinois.
2. Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
3. Drath, W. (2001). *The deep blue sea: Rethinking the source of leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the Center’s Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Tribune Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.*

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