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## Learning to Lead: Lessons Taken from the Wisest People We Know

Christine Kenney

*University of Michigan-Flint, ckmeyer@umich.edu*

Aviva Dorfman

*University of Michigan-Flint, adorfman@umich.edu*

Sapna V. Thwaite

*University of Michigan-Flint, sapnav@umich.edu*

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UNIVERSITY OF  
**Nebraska**  
Omaha

# LEARNING TO LEAD: LESSONS TAKEN FROM THE WISEST PEOPLE WE KNOW

Christine Kenney

Aviva Dorfman

Sapna V. Thwaite

University of Michigan-Flint

How we engage and interact with young children and what we know about supporting them as they grow into the best versions of themselves is a window into what we also know about adults as they grow into the best leaders they can be. How we support and teach children has informative parallels for what leaders in education might learn and draw upon in their interactions and engagements with the people with whom they work. The goal of this paper is to introduce four principles of early childhood education (emotions and feelings are important, relationships are vital, process orientation is essential, and play as a human need) that support our youngest as they grow and develop; and, using the leadership literature, examine how such principles might be tools for strengthening leaders in early childhood education as well.

## Thinking Leadership in Early Childhood Education

In the *Three Rs of Leadership*, Biddle (2012) states that research literature on leadership is “extensive but far from conclusive” (p. 12). Different theoretical perspectives have provided the backbone for our current understanding about leadership in general, and early childhood education leadership more specifically (O’Neill & Brinkerhoff, 2018; Roe, 2014; Sullivan, 2010; Sykes & Schultz, 2014; Terrell, 2018). Some theories focus on who a leader is in terms of specific traits and personal characteristics. Others center on leader behavior and how leaders spend time responding to organizational dilemmas and adapting their approach to varying circumstances. Some focus on leadership style and ways that leaders relate and engage with their colleagues. Some advocate specifically for an approach rooted in charisma and transformation while others might insist that effective leadership, especially educational leadership, is rooted in one’s understanding of self and how one fits into the overall teaching, learning, and leading system. As we thought about early childhood education leadership, we recalled Maurice Sykes’ assertion that a leader’s core is that leaders are what they believe (Sykes & Schultz, 2014). We believe that the field of early childhood education provides a window through which one can understand a good deal about humans and human societies. In that light, we thought about what early childhood educators know about humans based on what we know about children through studying, raising, and teaching them. We reviewed knowledge of early childhood educators that is basic to early childhood education and is relevant to leadership more generally, but particularly noteworthy when looking through the lens of leadership in the early childhood education context. Throughout this paper, we highlight what we know about children, what we know about leadership, and the parallels between the two. An examination of this kind sheds light on fundamental principles applicable to both best practice for young children but also advantageous strategies for improving leadership within the field of early childhood education.

## What Do We Know About Children?

First, we recognize that children are born full human beings and are worthy of respect and dignity from birth, and then we need to teach them as the young children they are. Similarly, all persons that a leader works with and leads are worthy of respect and dignity. Respect and dignity are important because feelings and emotions are important. Just as children have the same emotional capacity as adults and their cognition is what develops, the

people we work with have feelings and are always learning how to live with them. Self-regulation and monitoring are essential to well-being and positive relationships.

Early childhood education (sometimes referred to as ECE) teaches us that relationships are vital (Baker & Manfredi-Petitt, 2004; Dombro et al., 2011; Lally & Mangione, 2017; NAEYC, 2020). It is essential to listen and be heard, to empathize and respond to the feelings of others, and to build community. To build and maintain relationships and community, as well as to function effectively, direct and clear communication is necessary. Sincere relationships will encounter conflicts that cannot be avoided; these need to be addressed directly and managed. We teach children skills of negotiation, and these skills are as important to adults in professional settings. Negotiation leads to compromises that everyone can agree on.

Educators also know that children, who have so little control over their environment, thrive when they are given choices. Having a choice of materials, activities, and problems to work on ensures that children will see these elements as relevant, meaningful, and self-rewarding. Choice is considered a key component of play-based teaching (NAEYC, 2020), and intrinsic motivation is the best incentive regardless of age. Process orientation is also important. Rather than focus on the goal or the product, a focus on the process is developmentally oriented and invites participation and perseverance when obstacles arise (Isbell & Yoshizawa, 2016).

Just as is clear for children, play is a human need throughout the lifespan (Brown, 2009; Elkind, 2007; Gray, 2009; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019; Sutton-Smith, 1997). The characteristics of play include some attributes we mentioned above: choice, intrinsic motivation, process orientation, and non-literality (pretend, vision, values, imagery, metaphor, a game frame, symbols), as well as focused attention, relevance and emotional meaningfulness, and positive affect (joyfulness) (Gray, 2009; Johnson et al., 2005; Trawick-Smith, 2020). Playfulness is important as it encourages deep engagement, humor engenders good feelings, and fun can contribute to well-being and social bonding.

Finally, early childhood educators function out of a deeply embedded developmental perspective (NAEYC, 2020). Children have a developmental imperative, with innate pressure to learn and improve. All humans need to be seen, heard, recognized, and supported to develop into their potential. Development—physical, personal, or professional—is a framework and perspective that is as relevant to adults in organizations as it is to children.

In early childhood, constructivism is seen as a way of understanding and enacting a developmental approach. We know from constructivism (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Bransford, et al., 2000; Van Hoorn, et al., 2015; Vygotsky, 1978) that knowledge is constructed, not received, and moreover it is socially constructed. Learning is active and consists of a process of construction in interaction, whether with objects, materials, subjects, and concepts, or by contact with the minds of others (Castagnetti, 2014) through exploration, representation of thinking, and reflection (Bickart et al., 1999). These processes are as true of adult learning as they are of children and provide a way of seeing all persons as learning and developing.

## **What Do We Know About Early Childhood Leadership?**

When initially thinking of leadership, one might gravitate towards images of individuals defined by their given title or role in an organization. In contrast, we believe leadership, like the evolving growth of children over time, is a developmental process that consists of a set of thoughts, behaviors, and practices that are integrally connected to the construction of knowledge and may appear in several forms. Leaders may also possess distinctive attributes and perspectives based on their life experiences (Inman, 2013). Over time, they cultivate distinctive core values and professional qualities because of their exposure to different people, cultures, and contexts (Mayo, 2007; Shah, 2010). Leadership development is cultivated based on these diverse experiences and one's growth is a continuous learning process that may span a lifetime (Brungardt, 1997).

When specifically examining leadership in the field of early childhood education, Klevering and McNae (2018) suggest that while leadership in general has been a prominent focus in the extant research literature, a specific focus on what leadership in early childhood looks like (as well as best early childhood leadership practices) is only beginning to come to light. Some authors stress there may be a lack of consistent understanding of what early childhood leadership entails (Douglass, 2019; Humpries & Senden, 2000; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Thornton, 2010). For example, given the considerable range of early childhood education contexts (private childcare, in-home settings, for-profit, grant subsidized centers, etc.), leadership in each of these settings will likely vary. There is a need for oversight in the management of the day-to-day business as well as leadership in pedagogical decisions imperative to quality early childhood education (Brooker & Cumming, 2019; Douglass, 2019; Klevering & McNae, 2018). These two roles (management and pedagogical decision making) may be referred to interchangeably within

the world of early childhood education by some (Brooker & Cumming, 2019). We caution that doing so narrows the scope and intricacies within the role of an early childhood education leader. Management duties such as supervising staff, oversight of and adhering to health, safety, and licensing protocols and overall building needs are one aspect of the job of an early childhood leader. Oversight such as mentorship of teachers, building familial and community relationships, establishing early childhood philosophical and curricular decisions, and developmentally appropriate materials selection are others. Both administrative/management leadership and pedagogical leadership are key in the early childhood education context. But lack of consistent understanding of their interactions across the range of early childhood settings may lead to ambiguity in our understanding of what makes an effective early childhood leader.

It is possible that traditional leadership roles, which may be defined from the male perspective, may not feel true to leaders in early childhood, most of whom are female (Clark, 2012; Douglass, 2019). A major finding in the work of Clark (2012) is that participants in the study found it difficult to define or demonstrate themselves as a leader in the traditional sense or held a lack of confidence in their own leadership capabilities. Klevering and McNae (2018) interviewed a small group of early childhood leaders (all women) and found their participants did identify themselves as leaders; moreover, they stressed that opportunities for shared and collaborative leadership were important and preferred over other leadership styles. Findings suggest that while a solid definition of leadership in early childhood education is still unfolding, characteristics of a successful early childhood leader may include a focus on strong relationship building, collaborative spirit, communication, and trust (Klevering & McNae, 2018).

Given the multifaceted nature of early childhood education, some have argued that taking leadership theories from other fields and applying them to the context of early childhood education may be misguided (Rodd, 1996; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Krieg et al., 2014). Consequently, there have been calls for reconceptualization of early childhood leadership (Davis et al., 2015; Hazegh, 2020; Klevering & McNae 2018; Nicholson, et al., 2020). Klevering and McNae (2018) state that “it may be useful to consider new ways of theorizing about leadership, through the lenses of early childhood educators and leaders” (p. 13), especially considering context specific attributes of the field. Examples include the multiple roles of leaders involving managerial and curricular and personal role modeling; issues of diversity and the predominantly female workforce; multiplicity of the conceptualizations of leadership as hierarchical, distributed, relational, post-modernist, etc., and the conflation and minimization of the importance of early childhood professionals given the mix of education and care in the practice of early childhood education.

In this article we contribute to the conversation about reconceptualizing early childhood leadership. In alignment with the view of early childhood leadership as praxis (Klevering & McNae, 2018; Nicholson et al., 2020) we support a position that bases the conceptualization of leadership in ways constitutive of values embedded in the purposes of early childhood leadership (Nicholson et al., 2020). We point specifically to what we know about practice in early childhood education with children and take as foundational the inherent humanity of children. We appeal for explicit consistency with what is needed in leadership as a reflection of the shared humanity between children and adults. When practices and values of early childhood education underlie our conceptualization of the role and attributes of its leadership, then those practices and values include the responsibility for developing early childhood places of practice as opportunities to create ‘collaborative, ethical, inclusive and socially just communities’ (Davis et al., 2015, p. 145). In recognizing these values as foundational to our vision of leadership, we support the belief that “the field of early childhood needs more leadership theorizing that intentionally describes the purposes of working for change including goals of reducing oppressions and bringing about greater equity for children, families, communities and the early childhood workforce” (Nicholson et al., 2020, p. 115).

## **Building a Bridge Between What We Know from Children and Leadership**

Having explored what we know about children as they mature and also what we know about early childhood leadership, a noteworthy next step is to examine parallels between essential elements of supporting young children and how this knowledge can be mobilized to support leadership development. Social constructivism is often viewed as a pillar of early childhood education (Branscombe et al., 2013; Edwards, 2005). As children construct meaning, learn, and develop they draw upon interactions with the world around them, including social and cultural elements within that world (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). Constructivism focuses on the importance of engagement with the world around oneself, application of knowledge, benefits of reflective practice, and being an active agent rather than a passive recipient in knowledge acquisition (Branscombe et al., 2013).

A similar social constructivist approach can be applied to the field of early childhood education leadership (Biddle, 2012; Lambert, et al., 2002). Lambert and colleagues (2002), when looking at the constructivist leader,

propose that the lives of children and adults are “inextricably intertwined” with both following similar patterns of needs: “if something is worthy for children, it is also worthy for adults” (p. xvi). According to this work, constructivism is the basis from which all learn (children, adults, organizations) and eventually lead. Understanding the needs of children as they grow may also shed light on similar needs of adults as leaders. Using a social constructivist approach, we propose that just as children navigate development by mediating internal thought processes and learning with external interactions with the world around them, so too do leaders in early childhood education as they construct their understanding concerning who they are as a leader and how they might also nurture the individuals with whom they work. Many educational leaders lived through various positions in the education system (i.e., student, teacher, principal, superintendent, etc.). It is likely that experiences at each stage impact and shape choices made as a leader. Therefore, just as children grow into who they are based on their lived experiences (past and present), so too do early childhood educational leaders. One can examine evidence-based core considerations and principles (NAEYC, 2020) to uncover patterns of needs for children that may likewise also be worthy of examination for adult leaders (Lambert, et al., 2002).

Based on our expertise in the field and long-term experience in early childhood education, we thought about the principles of ECE that are at the heart of the field and our practice. We created a list of numerous principles that ground practice, including the four presented in this paper, and used them as an analytical framework for our reading. As a result of our initial work, we selected the four principles that generated the closest connection to both early childhood and early childhood leadership literature. Throughout the remainder of this paper, we highlight four early childhood education principles known to support children, which we also believe are beneficial to understanding oneself as a leader. These principles, while impactful for all leaders, are especially relevant for early childhood educational leaders who no doubt possess a keen understanding of the learning and teaching context. These principles include: 1) Feelings and emotions are important; 2) Relationships are vital; 3) Process orientation is essential; and 4) Play is a human need. We offer examples for how these principles might be displayed by early childhood leaders and professionals as they navigate leadership development and fostering leadership in others with whom they work. Finally, we offer implications for early childhood leadership development in the future.

## **ECE Principles of Practice and Connections to Leadership**

### **Emotions and Feelings Are Important**

Emotional development is an evolving process that starts in infancy and continues into adulthood. As children develop and are exposed to different people and contexts, their emotional lives become increasingly complex. Cultivating skills and knowledge for negotiating a wide range of emotions is integral for one’s emotional well-being. Parents and teachers of young children encourage them to develop their emotional vocabulary by teaching them words to label the different feelings they experience. For instance, if a child has a tantrum, they might be better helped to understand their feelings by an adult acknowledging that they “look mad and frustrated,” as opposed to telling them to “calm down and stop having a tantrum!” Children are also encouraged to witness and label others’ emotions, such as with their peers at school, and to understand and acknowledge when the adults in their lives are experiencing various emotions. For instance, a family member might share with their child that they are feeling upset and overwhelmed because the house is messy, and they need help to get things in order. When children learn to accept different feelings and emotions, they are likely to develop a more robust emotional vocabulary, which may lead to a better tolerance of frustration, fewer destructive behaviors, and less impulsivity (Joseph & Strain, 2003).

In addition to acquiring the ability to label emotions and acknowledging their own and others’ feelings, children are also encouraged to share and talk about their feelings when they experience various emotions. For example, if a young child loses their favorite toy and is feeling sad, a close adult might allow them to cry and vent and offer hugs or words of consolation. They might attempt to align with the child’s feelings by sharing a story about how they experienced a similar loss when they were the same age. It can be quite beneficial for children to observe adults showing their own emotional response to a situation. When children witness adults having an emotionally charged response to a challenging situation, it can provide them with tools and knowledge to accept the same for themselves. Ultimately, nurturing children’s awareness around challenging emotions and helping them constructively manage their response by providing a supportive and comfortable environment where they can freely express their feelings is important.

Children who feel emotionally safe are more likely to cultivate appropriate emotional regulation skills to cope with challenging feelings (Lantieri, 2008). There are times when children might act out their feelings in

inappropriate or problematic ways. Developing the ability to manage one's emotions in accordance with the demands of the situation might involve learning the ability to calm oneself down when one gets upset, adapting more readily to a change in expectations, and being able to handle frustration without a highly charged emotional response (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012).

Children must be actively supported in situations that invoke acutely stressful emotions and feelings, such as coping with the emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Navigating the rapid transition to online learning, coping with feelings of uncertainty and isolation, and the overall sense of disruption has had a detrimental effect on some children's emotional well-being, particularly those who were facing racial, economic, and other inequities that became more pronounced since the start of the pandemic (Li et al., 2021). One's state of emotional well-being, in turn, is likely to influence one's learning processes, development, and motivation, so it is critical that children are aided in developing effective coping skills and cultivating a sense of emotional resilience (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Taking the time to talk with children and answering their questions in developmentally appropriate ways can help reduce some fear and uncertainty and allow them to experience better control over their emotions.

Based on what we know from children, emotions and values are foundational to child development and to human development in the adult world as well. Leaders in early childhood education must reflect upon their own feelings and emotions and how these impact those around them. Emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, anger, etc.) are integral to the human condition. Ignoring these emotions does little to assist us or those we work with. The key is to connect authentically with feelings and emotions, process them, and act on them in a professional manner that works for all.

Daniel Goleman, a leading author in the area of emotional intelligence, advances the notion that emotional self-regulation is a central leadership skill. "In my experience, I've never seen the tendency toward radical outbursts to surface as an indicator of strong leadership," says Goleman (Retrieved on 7/12/2021, from <https://stlpolished.com/4-self-regulation-skills-all-leaders-should-possess/>). Terrell (2018) lists qualities needed to be an ECE leader: "intelligence, toughness, determination, and vision. However, graceful leadership also requires emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills; ... without emotional intelligence, the leader cannot be successful" (p. 86). Research consistently shows that self-regulation is essential for emotional well-being (du Plessis et al., 2015) and that becoming aware of one's emotions and how one reacts to them is an essential aspect of becoming a self-aware leader (Rodd, 2001; Sadri, 2012). Developing productive emotional coping mechanisms can also lead to stronger interpersonal relationships (Wheeler, 2012).

How does one cultivate a sense of emotional control as an educational leader? Similarly to children, leaders must develop ways to manage stressful emotions and impulses and maintain control over their actions. One way to accomplish this is to be aware of individuals and contexts that trigger an unwanted response and develop strategies to maintain one's composure when such triggers arise; however, in the adult world, when people are invested in their work and are passionate about it, they will likely identify with and have strong feelings about it. It is important to include an awareness of feelings in the workplace for a department, program, school, or district to function well together. When people can express themselves freely, they are able to truly talk things through and come together to conclusions and decisions that are best overall. In Sullivan's (2010) book on leadership skills for teachers of young children, she emphasizes the power of reflection to support educators in learning to lead – all chapters in the book are built around "Ask Yourself" questions to guide the reader to examine their emotions, values, attitudes, and approaches.

There need not be emotions that are unspeakable or unacceptable. Yet we know that many work environments shy away from the inclusion of anger as worthy of acceptable expression. When angry, there are ways that people might express themselves that are productive: they need not act out, yell, blame, shame, curse or swear, or cause hurt to others to express anger. Anger can be an expression of passion and may galvanize the group for action. According to Heath, Stavdal, and Siggurdson (2021), the key is to "feel the fear and the anger, use it to change the world, and enfold leadership in hope and the pursuit of justice" (p. 1). In short, to cultivate emotional intelligence in an early childhood leadership context, one must possess the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions as well as recognize the emotions of other individuals. This is a gradual process that involves engaging in continual self-observation and reflection in the spirit of cultivating self-awareness.

A leader's self-awareness about relevant traits, skills, and behaviors can be increased by openly receiving feedback from multiple sources. Requesting feedback from one's colleagues, whether in the form of informal or more formal (i.e., 360-degree survey) comments, involves a certain degree of openness and vulnerability; however, developing a balanced and realistic perspective involves active listening and communication with a variety of different individuals. According to Thwaite (2020), "developing a sense of emotional empathy is an important means by which one can better understand the contextual factors in which one is leading and as a result, be more sensitive about the impact of one's decision making" (p. 30). It is important to note, however, that empathizing

doesn't always mean agreement. Telling individuals that you heard their perspective does not imply that you necessarily agree with their position, but it signals a sense of authenticity in one's leadership style that is central to building strong relationships with others (Thwaite, 2022).

### **Relationships are Vital**

For young children, relationships are a pivotal element of learning about themselves and the world around them. We know that young children learn better and more effectively in a setting in which they feel safe and seen, where there are adults who care about them, and peers with whom to play and interact (NAEYC, 2020). We purposefully build strong and secure connections with children and intentionally teach them relationship skills and strategies for negotiation so that they may themselves build solid and lasting friendships. We assist them in navigating relationship conflict in productive ways and to recognize and manage their own feelings while also acknowledging the feelings of others. To that end, we support the development of children's self-regulation by listening to them—signaling that their voices are essential and impactful, and empathizing with them—relaying that their feelings are valid and important.

Equally powerful, we assist children in learning to listen to one another and support their abilities to empathize with their peers to build community and develop friendships. We allow children to develop ownership of their environment and have a vital stake in decision-making processes both for themselves and for the greater good. We teach independence but also how such independence is connected to other individuals. Children learn from one another and other adults in their environment, thus making these relationships the cornerstone of development. All of these are core considerations and principles of development supported by the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Developmentally Appropriate Practice position statement (NAEYC, 2020).

For children, relational skills and relationships are often cultivated through play (Curtis, 2017; Galinsky, 2010; NAEYC, 2020). When children are invested in a play engagement with others, they may be willing to compromise their own personal goals and ideas to meet the needs of their play partners and to further the goal of keeping the play going. Children must weigh their own needs, ideas, and play choices against the desires, ideas, and choices of their play partners. This is often a sophisticated balancing act that relies on quite complex self-regulation, listening, empathy, and problem-solving skills, in service of having the play continue. Relationships between children are key to this decision-making and hopefully children have numerous opportunities to foster these skills through being listened to, having their choices respected, and being nurtured to do the same with their peers. When children fail to employ such skills with others, they quickly learn how their actions have consequences such as others not wanting to play, hurt feelings, and so forth.

Children understand the functions and benefits of community and that relationships are vital. Somewhere along the way, as children develop into adults, particularly in Western cultures where independence is emphasized as a value, they may begin to believe that everything can be done independently. This is a vastly different perspective from what we teach children about the essential nature of collaborative relationships and community building. In keeping with this view of children, we maintain that relationships are vital for adults within early childhood leadership positions. Going it alone does not make for successful leadership especially since the relational organizational culture and climate in early childhood contexts may have a powerful impact on adult-child relationships (Douglass, 2018). In a research study of early childhood services provided in Finland, Heikka and Hujala (2013) also found that the quality of ECE leadership was improved when the primary emphasis was on early childhood leaders cultivating strong working relationships with teachers, center directors, and other stakeholders.

Hazegh (2020) emphasizes the need to have caring be an important component of these relationships. As she states, Caring is a major component of this leadership...as an individual who can focus on the child's well-being, build parents' capacity, educate parents in early childhood education, put family at the center of the child's ecosystem, empower parents to advocate for children, build relationships with parents, build a bridge between home and school learning, and support teacher/parent relationships. (p. 20)

As a leader of others (i.e., supervisor, administrator, etc.) a beneficial perspective to hold, both for oneself and for others, is that everyone is doing what they can with what they have at any given moment. When leaders assume that others will work in the same manner or to the same capacity as they themselves, relationships may be strained. Sweikert (2019) suggests using "developmentally appropriate practice for adults" where we "accept...employees where they are and guide them to learn and grow" (p. 45). At the center of this developmentally appropriate practice approach for adults are many lessons we also emphasize for children including actively listening, one-on-one attention, offering choice, empathizing, understanding that feelings are real and valid, encouraging community building, and problem-solving.

We offer a scenario for how this developmentally appropriate practice through relationships might unfold. When an employee is struggling, it is possible as a supervisor to reprimand that employee in front of others to

incentivize them to work harder, make fewer mistakes, and do things differently. While this may result in a short-term change in behavior, long-term, the relationship will be strained and may lead to feelings of embarrassment, anger, and/or hostility. Instead, if this same employee is given one-on-one attention, provided choices of support, asked what might assist them in maximizing their potential, and is given the opportunity to share their own hopes, goals, and ideas, the productivity of the individual may increase. Perhaps more important, the relationship between the employee and supervisor will more than likely become stronger and more genuine. Like the example of the playing children provided earlier, compromising one's own needs for the greater good and capitalizing on listening skills, empathy, support, and choice allows for the play or interaction to continue. Capitalizing on similar relational skills with a struggling colleague may also enable fruitful benefits. The guide here is the benefits of relationships and what successful relationships teach.

All in all, children learn at a young age that community is key, relationships are vital, and others can be seen as sources for stability and support. Children also learn that through solid and strong relationships, they can gain a greater sense of who they are as a person. Adult leaders must also look to relationships as a central focus to foster a sense of connection and work successfully with others (Ratner et al., 2021). The developmental continuum one embodies when fostering their own and others' leadership skills must rely on positive engagement and interactions with others.

### **Process Orientation is Essential**

All too often, the result is what achieves notoriety rather than the journey taken to reach this result or product. With children, we stress the process over the product. As young children develop, they must utilize exploration, trial and error, experimentation, creativity, risk-taking, and so much more to learn about the world. From multiple iterations the child learns valuable skills and lessons they will inevitably build upon. Thus, the process of developing becomes key. An environment that is conducive to creativity emphasizes process over product. A focus on process orientation pulls children in. Because there is no right or wrong, the stakes are lower. Exploration is possible as children engage with materials in process-oriented ways, and helps children move from actions to find out what a material can do, to discovering what they can do with it -- real play (Johnson et al., 2005). As a teacher:

When your focus is the children, their creative thinking process, the steps they implement, and the ways you support their creativity, children are more likely to feel encouraged to keep experimenting instead of concerned about whether they have 'correctly' accomplished something you wanted them to reproduce. (Isbell & Yoshizawa, 2016, p. 22).

For example, a young child exploring with crayons and paper is in the process of learning how to draw. A very young child's aim in the activity is not to draw realistically, or to represent objects; they want to play with the medium. They will make marks to see what kinds of marks they can make and where they can make them. With experience they will discover the effects of different marks made in different places on the paper. When there is an expectation that they will create a recognizable image before they are ready, they experience frustration, and many will back away from the activity. Whereas, when the focus is on the process, drawing is a joyful activity. By continuing to engage in drawing they develop the control to make marks and place them deliberately on the page, to the point where they can and will begin to represent the world in their pictures (Kellogg, 1968). By middle childhood, children begin to focus on the product as well, but emphasis on the process is still a requirement for deep engagement.

Development in and of itself is a process. With children, we celebrate this process, we encourage them to take risks, try new things, and be creative. What will become the product is directly dependent on the process children take and the support they receive from others around them. Honoring and harnessing the process of development, and teaching children to do the same, is a principle early childhood educators hold dear. We believe valuing process orientation is also pertinent to leaders and leadership development.

As adults engage with one another and their work, they must also be encouraged to take risks, experiment, be creative, try something new, and get to know who they are as people. Just as children develop through this process, so too will educational leaders. In her work, Strehmel (2016) discusses the need for ECE leaders to engage in quality interactions with parents and other colleagues to optimally address individual needs and organizational quality. This process is regarded as a shared endeavor and has a direct impact on pedagogical quality. Rosenow (2019) also suggests that one must look within, investigating emotions, feelings, and relationships in a nuanced way to fully understand oneself as an early childhood leader. Capitalizing on process orientation throughout this introspective approach allows for greater understanding of the strengths and potential areas for growth. It is an iterative process where, particularly in a context that values relationships such as early childhood education, internal examination can be leveraged against external encounters and social interactions to gain an understanding of who



one is and how they engage with others. Bennis and Thomas (2002) posit crucibles or defining moments in a leader's life as areas where one might develop new ways of viewing oneself, perhaps a new definition of self. However, if an individual focuses on a desired product (e.g., being a successful director, earning a raise) the frustration or fear of failure may hinder progress. Given that early childhood education is a female dominated field and some research has observed that female early childhood professionals do not necessarily view themselves as leaders (e.g., Clark, 2012), the process of defining oneself as a leader may be just what is needed to have more individuals see themselves in that way. If early childhood professionals try to fit within the mold of other leadership theories (ones that do not mesh as well with early childhood education leadership) they may be less inclined to view themselves as having leadership capacity.

Within the workplace and as adults, we may make decisions or choose a course before we have ample information to make the best decision possible. Focusing on the process allows for creativity and flexibility to see alternate possibilities which will, in turn, allow us to choose a better course as more information is learned over time. When we place too much emphasis on the product, we may find ourselves constraining the possible solutions too soon. Lambert and colleagues (2002) urge those in leadership and educational positions to choose "integrity over urgency, autonomy and discretion over control, complexity over simplicity" (p. xv). Thus, the process is what is important, in addition to the eventual product, goal, or outcome.

Rather than being outcome or goal focused, a developmental perspective emphasizes the process of development rather than the endgame. In fact, leadership itself can be seen as "a process that is both interactive and emergent... Leadership is a set of interactions rather than the actions of an individual" (O'Neill & Brinkerhoff, 2018, p. 14). Following O'Neill and Brinkerhoff, we invite the reader to think of leadership itself as systems and processes. Senge et al. (2015) contrast ineffective leaders who try to make change happen, with system leaders, who focus on the creation of conditions for change to occur and be sustained. This process orientation is what we have learned from working with children and is as relevant to the workings of leadership in the workplace as it is to the classroom. When we value and intentionally leave room for process, we allow ourselves and those we work with to take risks to be creative, to value the relationships, respect and include different perspectives, and build a stronger unit. The outcome becomes richer and better for the value of the process.

## **Play is a Human Need**

Emotions and feelings, positive relationships, and a focus on process, not product, have more in common than their importance to humans. Each of these is related to a specific human need: play. One can hardly think about children or imagine them without thinking of play as well. Play is what children, and really all humans, are wired to do. It has been studied in multiple fields and from multiple perspectives, from evolution to psychology and neurology, as well as learning science, creativity, and curiosity.

Play can be difficult to define as it is so varied and can be seen as more a state of mind than an action (Brown, 2009). Play researcher Stuart Brown describes play as "an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and a sense of time" (p. 60). Most often, people list a small number of attributes that characterize play: freely chosen, non-literal, intrinsically motivated, process-oriented, actively engaged, and emotionally meaningful or relevant (Trawick-Smith, 2020; see also similar versions in Johnson et al., 2005; Gray, 2009). One of the reasons that play is a powerful platform for learning is that it engages emotions as well as cognition. Learning that is laid down in association with positive emotion, such as through play, is more readily committed to long-term memory (Brown, 2009; Yogman, et al., 2018).

When children build with blocks, for example, they choose to engage in building and how to build. They might build pretend houses, castles, cities, zoos, forests, or farms and create elaborate scenarios of the life they imagine unfolding there. They build for the sake of building; they enjoy the activity and do not seek external reward for doing it. Moreover, they do not typically know what they are building when they start, or even if they start with an idea in mind, they do not have a blueprint or plan for what that structure or structures will look like. They allow the building to unfold as they play and focus more on the process of building as the storyline in their mind unfolds or as they encounter problems that need solving, for example finding the shape or size of block for a specific purpose. As they build, they are actively engaged, both physically and mentally, and as the structure comes into shape it becomes emotionally meaningful to see it come into being. Typically, the play themes are ones that interest the child, and that they find relevant to work through. When a well-meaning adult tells the child to build with blocks, what or how to build, or limits the time allotted for this activity, it is no longer either as playful an activity nor as enjoyable to the child.

Play researcher Brian Sutton-Smith sees adaptive variability as central to play's purpose, and therefore play's "function would be to save, in both brain and behavior, more of the variability that is potentially there than would otherwise be saved if there were no play" (1997, p. 225). Due to its quirky variability, redundancy, and

flexibility, attributes required in evolutionary processes described by Gould (cited in Sutton-Smith, 1997), Sutton-Smith argued that play is the way in which humans preserve the characteristics of newborns and very young children as unrealistically optimistic, egocentric, and reactive – “all of which are guarantors of persistence in the face of adversity” (p. 231). Due to its characteristics, play is highly motivating and has what Stuart Brown has called “inherent attraction” and “continuation desire” (2009, p. 17-18).

In the adult world, play is the lubricant that eases social interaction: humor and light banter allow us to overcome our initial awkwardness and warm up to talk with one another, and to smooth out moments that might be sources of social tension. Games played, in competition or in teams, or watched together when observing sports, provide participants a shared experience that leads to identification and social bonding. A healthy work environment often includes humor, shared jokes, and levity. When leaders retain an interest and support colleagues to develop themselves, personally as well as professionally, the work and people are better off for it. Rarely is anyone’s life complete through work alone. Both Sutton-Smith (1997) and Stuart Brown (2009) make the case that the opposite of play is depression – not work (2009). Brené Brown (2018), in her discussion of the differences between armored leadership and daring leadership, states that one aspect of daring leadership is modeling and supporting rest, play, and recovery. “If we want to live a life of meaning and contribution, we have to become intentional about cultivating sleep and play” (p. 106).

Early childhood education leader Ann McClain Terrell (2018) opens her chapter on graceful leadership (also the title of her book) with a description of how much she loves college basketball and her habit of making out a March Madness bracket. She closes her book suggesting that developing leaders create a vision board of inspiration, providing an example of her own vision board. Sykes includes “fun and enjoyment” in his list of eight essential leadership qualities (Sykes & Schultz, 2014, p. 18). These are examples of the ways in which play can be seen as not only relevant but inherent in adult leadership activity. As Elkind has written, “play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels” (2007, p. 4). Play is a source of renewal, imagination, and creativity, as in a quote, attributed to Jean Piaget, “Play is the answer to the question, How does anything new ever come about?” (Elkind, 2007, p. 3).

Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky highlighted the importance of pretend play to a child’s development and functioning and famously wrote that at play, a child functions as if a head taller (Vygotsky, 1967). This is also true of the adults who care for them. Like children, who play their future selves as they are figuring out the present in play, adults who lead with care extend “an invitation to live a creative life” by addressing the current needs with imagination, immersed in their creative vision, “as though we were a head taller than ourselves” (Murray, 2021, p. 345). In early childhood educational leadership, play involves being “creative, flexible, and curious; thinking of possibilities; and taking chances. It means taking on new roles, just as children do in pretend play” (Sullivan, 2010, p. 40).

Playful work that values and focuses on emotions, feelings, relationships, and process leads to more joy. People derive more satisfaction from being heard, involved, and being able to contribute; they also enjoy the discovery and learning involved and experience the satisfaction of finding an optimum solution that honors the contributions of multiple perspectives. When the work takes place in a context such as this it becomes more playful and bears the characteristics of play in allowing choice, process orientation, intrinsic motivation, non-literality (imagination and identity), active engagement, and focused attention – leading to joy. When early childhood leaders foster a playful working environment that values creativity and risk-taking as well as collaboration and teamwork (relationships) the process becomes key. The focus on process involves and values play, playfulness, and relationships, and will ideally most likely strengthen the eventual product.

## **Why Understanding What Children Do is Important to Early Childhood Leadership**

One may ask, why is what we know to be quality practice with children not also important for adults? We maintain that leadership development is a life-long process beginning in infancy and continuing throughout life. Just as Lambert and colleagues (2002) argued that the development of children and adults is “inextricably intertwined” (p. xvi), so too is the process of understanding oneself as a person as it applies to leadership. Erik Erikson (1963) proposed eight stages of psychosocial development an individual will encounter as they move through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In each of these stages, developing individuals navigate and negotiate areas of who they are or will become. Infants and children are encouraged to take risks, identify preferences, engage with others, and navigate relationships. This process continues into childhood and eventually adulthood as well. Erikson’s

stages that are particularly central to leadership development include initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, and identity vs. role confusion. Children maneuver through these stages differently to develop a sense of purpose (initiative vs. guilt), competency (industry vs. inferiority), and a sense of who they are or will become (identity vs. role confusion). Later in life, generativity vs. stagnation, another stage of Erikson's, addresses a sense of vitality and productivity, particularly pertinent to how individuals and organizations approach leadership. A solid sense of each of these is essential for an early childhood education leader. Erikson stressed that these stages build on one another; thus, the connection between childhood and adulthood is inescapable.

What children do on their own instinctively illuminates for us what humans basically are and how they best develop to fulfill their potential and purposes. Therefore, we believe that the leadership we want to see in early childhood education needs to honor what we know about humans from what we have learned about children and what we teach young children—that is, to honor our feelings and emotions, intentionally focus on relationship building, center the process of working with shared purpose, and harness the value of play. We argue that these principles cannot be considered in isolation and, when considered together, can lead us to an emotionally healthier concept of leadership.

Despite the considerable literature on leadership, very little research explores how leaders experience their role, especially in senior-level positions (Zumaeta, 2018). Besides the obvious explanation that “the top is not a crowded place” (Reinking & Bell, 1991), lack of adequate support, increased social disconnection from others, and resulting lived experience of psychological-occupational stress (Fletcher & Wisneski, 2020) can exacerbate the sense of isolation and loneliness that often accompanies demanding leadership positions. We believe that an early childhood leader who is encouraged to value feelings and emotions, relationships, process, and the role of play and playfulness is ultimately likely to experience more joy in the workplace as well as contribute more meaningfully to the development of a joyful and healthier emotional climate for all. This is particularly critical given the uncertainty and change that many early childhood educators and educational leaders are facing in our current global context.

## **Our Vision for Leaders**

What does it mean to find and foster joy in leadership in the education context? We maintain the belief that how one relates to others as well as the quality and depth of those relationships is central to early childhood education leadership. As one progresses forward through the ranks, one's interpersonal skills become more critical in determining one's overall leadership effectiveness. Building meaningful interpersonal connections strengthens engagement and morale by inspiring a sense of common purpose. It allows leaders and their colleagues to experience shared success and contributes to an overall sense of harmony. It helps create an organizational culture that values the development of a sense of belonging, which is an essential prerequisite for one's colleagues to feel accepted and included for their authentic selves. Kurland (2018) discussed creating a “climate of care” and found that essential elements include modeling a caring disposition to others and engaging in discussions about feelings (p. 707).

Doing work that has purpose and impact is also an essential part of experiencing joy as a leader in early childhood education. In “Climate of Joy: Creating true happiness in our field,” Hernandez (2016) speaks to the need for joy to be authentic, natural, and unscheduled and that “joy is an individual calling and responsibility; it is not up to a director or manager to create happy people, but modeling joy is a smart strategy” (p. 3). All too often, early childhood education leaders (and perhaps all leaders) find themselves buried under “invisible” administrative tasks that do not have personal meaning or for which they do not receive acknowledgement or appreciation. New leaders might need to be more actively supported in the process of identifying and defining their sense of leadership purpose. As Craig and Snook (2014) state, “the process of articulating your purpose and finding the courage to live it—what we call *purpose to impact*—is the single most important developmental task you can undertake as a leader.” One's sense of leadership purpose is derived from one's sense of identity, the essence of how one defines oneself as a leader. Leadership identity serves as an essential anchor for one's emotions, values, and presence in one's work and in the world.

Lastly, early childhood leaders who center their work on cultivating joy as well as expressing appreciation and gratitude for others bring colleagues together, shape collaborative efforts, and encourage team building. Team building, in turn, creates a sense of trust, reduces conflict, and encourages open communication. The resulting deep sense of human connection will likely lead to the development of a healthier emotional climate for all. When our colleagues feel respected, understood, and valued, we as leaders have created an essential foundation for synergy and shared success. As Williams (2017) states, “Leaders can impact a system in ways that others cannot” (p. 43).

Our vision for a leader in early childhood education is one who views everyone as being in the process of development. Such a leader, with a constructivist approach focused on development, would accept the people they work with where they are and listen to learn where they wish to grow, to support them becoming the professionals they are growing into being. Just as we do with children in our care, the same holds true for all developing early childhood leaders. Following Nicholson et al. (2020), we suggest that grounding our conceptualization of early childhood leadership in the principles that guide practice with young children is a direct consequence of opening the discussion of leadership to include the lens of early childhood educators at all levels. We assert that this can change the focus of reconceptualizing early childhood leadership to work toward social and ethical betterment for children, families, teachers, and society at large. We must not assume that one arrives as a leader just as we do not assume that a child simply becomes an adult. We believe that the role of the leader in education is to nurture an environment that supports this process, based on the four principles we have learned from early childhood: emotions and feelings are important, relationships are vital, process orientation is essential, and play is a human need. Such a leader would find and cultivate joy in the workplace and beyond.

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