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## Building the Leadership Capacity of Early Childhood Directors: An Evaluation of a Leadership Development Model

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### Abstract

While there is consensus among policymakers and practitioners about the importance of strong leadership in early childhood education, there is scant research on effective models of leadership development for administrators of early childhood programs, particularly those working in the child care sector. This is cause for concern because the majority of center directors assume their leadership positions without prior preservice management training. This study examined the effectiveness of Taking Charge of Change (TCC), a 10-month leadership development program that focuses on the nature of individual, organizational, and systemic change and the program director's role as a change agent. The study looked at two data sets: archived evaluation data from 502 participants across 20 cohorts of Taking Charge of Change and new data from 138 TCC alumni generated from an online survey. The archived information included data from several measures: A Training Needs Assessment Survey (TNAS), the Program Administration Scale (PAS), and the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES). The online survey to TCC alumni gathered information about their current job status, career decisions, continuing professional development, commitment to the early childhood profession, and professional achievements. The findings revealed evidence of individual growth and organizational improvement as well as positive program outcomes relating to accreditation status and participation in Illinois' quality rating system. The results of this study underscore the need for systematic, intensive, and relevant training focused on the unique needs of early childhood administrators.

### Introduction

Strong leadership is a vital component of any thriving organization (Bennis, 2009; Collins, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2008; Yukl, 2012). Research on leadership suggests that the most capable leaders are those who understand and address challenges from a systemswide perspective. They are the ones responsible for creating a climate that promotes the optimal growth and development of children as well as implementing systems to ensure that high quality is maintained (Bloom, 2004; Bruno, 2012; Kagan & Bowman, 1997; Sciarra & Dorsey, 2002). As leaders, early childhood administrators must be able to envision goals, affirm values, motivate staff, achieve unity of purpose, and foster norms of continuous improvement for their programs (Bloom, 2004).

While there is agreement among policymakers and practitioners alike about the importance of strong leadership in early childhood programs, there is limited research on effective models of leadership development for administrators, particularly those working in the child care sector. This is cause for concern because the majority of center directors assume their leadership positions without prior management training.

### Characteristics of Center-based Early Childhood Administrators

Over the past two decades, a number of studies have looked at different segments of the early childhood workforce. Out of this research has emerged a fairly clear portrait of center-based early childhood administrators who manage part-day and full-day, for-profit and nonprofit, Head Start, publicly funded, and faith-based programs.

While most early childhood teachers go into teaching as an expressed career goal, most directors were promoted

to their administrative position because others saw their leadership ability and encouraged them to pursue the role. In a study conducted in Illinois, approximately 90% of directors have been classroom teachers, but only one-fifth reported that they actively pursued an administrative position (Rafanello & Bloom, 1997). Only 27% of directors in a national study stated they were well-prepared for their administrative role; more than one-half of directors described the transition into their new administrative role as overwhelming (McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2003).

Directors' ability to attract and retain effective teachers in their programs, establish norms of ongoing quality improvement, and oversee other facets of program operations is directly related to their level of formal education, experience, and specialized training in both early childhood education and program administration. However, a national study found director qualifications are decreasing (Herzenberg, Price, & Bradley, 2005). This finding was confirmed by the results of an Illinois study. In 2001, 72% of Illinois center directors reported having a bachelor's degree or higher; in 2008, only 66% had a bachelor's degree or higher (Fowler, Bloom, Talan, Beneke, & Kelton, 2008).

A growing body of research suggests that directors' level of formal education is a strong predictor of overall program quality (Ackerman & Sansanelli, 2010; Bloom, 1990; Helburn, 1995; Rohacek, Adams, & Kisker, 2010; Ryan, Whitebook, Kipnis, & Sakai, 2011; Vu, Jeon, & Howes, 2008; Whitebook, Ryan, Kipnis, & Sakai, 2008). In addition, research on program quality has found a significant positive relationship between the quality of administrative practices and the quality of the children's learning environment in center-based programs (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Lower & Cassidy, 2007; McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2010; Kagan et al., 2008). Finally, directors with higher levels of education and specialized management training are more likely to support the professional development of their teaching staff, secure and maintain program funding, and achieve center accreditation (Ackerman, 2008; Bloom, 1996; Fowler et al., 2008; Iutcovich, Fiene, Johnson, Koppel, & Langen, 1997; McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2008; Rous, Grove, Cox, Townley, & Crumpton, 2008).

### **The Impact of Specialized Training in Program Administration on Professional Practice**

Research suggests that professional development makes a difference in the level of administrators' self-efficacy. After completing administrative training, directors with greater levels of administrative training report significant gains in their level of competence and staff who work at these programs perceive the work environment to be more positive and productive (Bella & Bloom, 2003; Bloom, 2010; Bloom & Bella, 2005; Bloom & Sheerer, 1992; Mietlicki, 2010). Administrative training coupled with a strong mentoring component emphasizing peer support results in demonstrable organizational change (Doherty, 2011). Bella (2013) found that directors with more administrative training report significant differences in both their self-perceptions as advocates and in their actions advocating for the early childhood workforce. They are also more likely to serve in a leadership role in an early childhood professional organization than directors with less administrative training.

### **The TCC Leadership Development Model**

Taking Charge of Change (TCC) focuses on the nature of individual, organizational, and systemic change and the early childhood director's role as change agent. Based on the principles of adult development and experiential learning, training is conducted by faculty and instructors from the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership using a variety of training formats, including formal presentations, large-group discussions, small-group experiences, and role playing. The TCC model is designed to provide a forum where directors participate in a professional learning community—a safe environment of critical inquiry where they share their successes and struggles with one another, co-construct knowledge, and reflect on their assumptions and beliefs about their role as program administrators.

The leadership training begins in the summer with a six-day convening residential institute. Participants meet again in the fall for a three-day connecting residential institute and then for a one-day culminating institute held in late spring in conjunction with Leadership Connections, a national conference for early childhood leaders. Over the 10-month program, participants receive approximately 80 hours of small- and large-group instruction and 20 hours of individual feedback and conference time with their instructors and mentors. At the culmination of training and the completion of field assignments, participants are eligible for six semester hours of college credit.

During the training, participants learn about two valid and reliable assessment tools that are used to inform their program improvement process. An organizational climate assessment using the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES) is conducted to evaluate the quality of work life at their respective centers (Bloom, 2010). Program staff at each center complete the ECWES. The surveys are then confidentially collected and sent to the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership to generate a report for each center. An assessment of administrative practices using items from the Program Administration Scale (PAS) is conducted by a reliable PAS assessor to measure the quality of leadership and management practices at their programs (Talan & Bloom, 2011). The profiles generated from the ECWES and PAS assessments are used as baseline data to guide their program improvement efforts. Both tools are also used at the end of the training to discern changes in program quality.



(excellent). For the current study, five items from the PAS were used. The 18 indicator strands comprising these five items relate to the focus of the Taking Charge of Change curriculum (e.g., Item 1: Staff Orientation, Item 2: Supervision and Performance Appraisal, Item 3: Staff Development, Item 9: Internal Communications, Item 16: Family Communications).

Pre- and post-PAS assessments were conducted for TCC participants beginning in 2007 (Cohort No. 15). The assessments were done by a reliable PAS assessor who was not involved in the TCC training. The assessment was administered on-site at the participant’s center and took approximately two hours. Each assessment included a brief tour of the facility, an interview with the administrator, and a review of documentation. Seventy-four programs were included in the PAS data analyses for this study.

**Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES).** The ECWES was administered to teaching, support, and administrative staff working at participants’ programs. The resulting ECWES profile that directors received provided information regarding staff’s collective perceptions of different organizational practices across 10 dimensions of organizational climate: collegiality, opportunities for professional growth, supervisor support, clarity, reward system, decision making, goal consensus, task orientation, physical setting, and innovativeness. The possible range of scores for each dimension is 0 to 10. A low score on any subscale represents unfavorable perceptions; a high score represents favorable perceptions.

The ECWES was administered at the beginning of the training cycle for each cohort and again at the end. Changes in data management software over the years made it difficult to retrieve data from some of the earliest cohorts. For the present study, 271 programs were used in the ECWES analyses. This represented the perceptions of more than 3,000 employees working at the participants’ programs.

**Job Status Survey.** An online questionnaire was developed to assess the job status, career decisions, continuing professional development, commitment, and professional achievements of TCC alumni. A cover letter and link to the online survey were sent to 278 active e-mail addresses of TCC alumni. Of those e-mails, 99 were opened. Approximately 50 e-mails were corrected and resent. In total, 138 individuals completed the survey. Five of the respondents had some missing data. Thus the *N* for the data analyses ranges between 133 and 138 depending on the item being analyzed. Additionally, telephone interviews with a small subset of TCC alumni were conducted.

## Findings

### Current Job Status and Career Decisions

Of the 138 alumni who completed the online survey, 69 (50%) indicated that they continued to work as an administrator of a center-based program after completing the TCC leadership training. Fifty-nine individuals (43%) indicated they no longer worked as directors but remained in the early childhood field in a variety of roles: college instructors, resource and referral specialists, regional managers for corporate-sponsored programs, consultants, and QRS assessors. Ten individuals (7%) had left the field because of retirement, health issues, or parenting needs.

TCC alumni were asked if they had made a job change since completing the training. Sixty-three individuals (46%) reported making at least one job change. When asked to identify the primary factor prompting their job change, 28% of respondents indicated a need for greater influence or challenge. Of those making a job change, 87% perceived their move as career advancement.

### The Impact of Training—Personal Change

The evaluation data compiled over two decades at the culmination of each TCC cohort provided self-reported information about the personal transformation participants experienced as the result of training—a sense of personal empowerment and a recommitment to the work. This study also sought to determine whether the feelings of personal empowerment that participants expressed at the end of their 10-month leadership program were sustained over time.

**Knowledge and skill.** As seen in Table 2, the results of the Training Needs Assessment Survey (TNAS) data analyses for the 502 participants in 20 cohorts revealed statistically significant increases in perceived knowledge and skill in all 18 areas assessed. The total pretest mean for the 20 cohorts was 52.60. The posttest mean was 72.10 for an increase of 19.50 points ( $p < .001$ ). The results of the data analyses indicate that Taking Charge of Change had a measurable impact on participants’ perceived level of competence in the knowledge and skill areas assessed. The two knowledge and skill areas in which participants reported experiencing the greatest growth were knowledge of how systems theory applies to early childhood organizations and how to implement an individualized model of staff development.

**Table 2**  
Pretest and Posttest Means for Knowledge and Skill Areas

	Pretest	Posttest	
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Item	M	M	t*
<b>Knowledge Areas</b>			
Knowledge of different personality typologies and learning styles	3.20	4.03	20.79
Knowledge of how systems theory applies to early childhood organizations	2.21	3.70	25.71
Knowledge of different leadership and supervisory styles	3.11	4.14	14.24
Knowledge of different early childhood professional resources	3.24	4.15	17.21
Knowledge of NAEYC accreditation criteria	3.19	4.04	13.77
<b>Skill Areas</b>			
How to diagnose organizational problems	2.64	3.94	20.68
How to implement an individualized model of staff development	2.53	4.04	24.77
How to use different supervisory styles for staff at different career stages	2.79	4.12	23.02
How to implement organizational change in nonthreatening ways	2.87	4.13	22.09
How to give and receive feedback	3.43	4.25	16.58
How to facilitate teamwork among staff	3.31	4.23	15.69
How to motivate staff to high levels of performance	3.08	4.06	17.12
How to implement a fair and equitable compensation system	2.64	3.62	17.36
How to conduct a comprehensive performance appraisal of staff	3.00	4.07	19.58
How to conduct an effective staff meeting	3.42	4.40	23.40
How to reduce the incidence of job stress and burnout	2.85	3.94	13.11
How to implement strategies to increase teachers' compensation	2.38	3.49	16.61
How to use the computer for electronic networking	2.72	3.74	15.07
<b>Total knowledge and skill</b>	<b>52.60</b>	<b>72.10</b>	<b>30.73</b>

Note: \*  $p < .001$

The 138 alumni who responded to the online survey were asked how their TCC experience contributed to their ability to affect change in their organizations and communities. Content analyses of the responses clustered in four areas: change management, self-reflection and perspective-taking, shared decision making, and staff development.

The capacity to manage change is a key to effective program leadership and is a central component of the TCC curriculum. Participants leave with a variety of resources to help assess the need for change and then manage the change process in a systematic and intentional way. One of the survey respondents stated:

I am not known for enjoying change, but since it was continually being forced upon me, I had the choice to either crumble under it, or develop the skills to survive it. ... TCC helped me navigate all this change without my staff (or myself) falling to pieces. I learned what it would take to get staff buy-in, see the possibilities in the change process, and develop a strong sense of teamwork within my center.

Respondents indicated that learning about their leadership and communication style provided the foundation for understanding others who may have a different style or point of view, with one respondent saying that “nothing has been more important to my personal growth and ability to understand and work with others than the self-reflection that was required at every step in TCC and became ingrained in my being.” This ability to perform better in the role of director through self-reflection and taking the perspective of others was repeatedly mentioned by participants who were interviewed after taking the survey. One director commented:

TCC made me think about what type of leadership style I want to have and it made me more aware of the importance of knowing the people I work with, their learning styles, past experiences that make up their beliefs, and where they may be on a self-awareness continuum.

This ability to expand one’s perspective is essential to implementing shared decision-making practices and to adopting an inclusive or distributed leadership approach. Implementing more collaborative decision-making and problem-solving processes was reported to be an important goal for many of the respondents—to consider themselves as part of a team rather than always dictating the agenda. As a respondent noted, “I am able to connect with my staff in a reflective mode rather than as a monitor. We discuss changes and ideas and issues to get to solutions.”

Promoting peak performance was identified as an important component of the learning experience for directors. Without effective staff-development skills, the other skills of change management—self-reflection, perspective taking, and shared decision making—become less impactful. One respondent stressed the importance of refining her staff-development skills, noting that “I began to see that my role was to nurture and care for the teachers in many of the same ways as I had the children.”

**Self-efficacy and confidence.** In addition to specific skill building, individuals commented on a heightened sense of self-esteem, a greater confidence, and a stronger sense of self-efficacy as a result of participating in the leadership training. Many had not perceived themselves to be leaders before attending the training but left with an overwhelming sense of awe at the importance of their role and the power and potential of their position to

make a difference. One respondent said, "I have always identified Taking Charge of Change as the single most influential contribution to my professional growth. TCC allowed me to put things into perspective, prioritize, and work toward positive change in my program."

**Perceived level of competency.** The 69 alumni who were directors of center-based programs were asked to indicate their current level of role competency—novice, capable, or master director. They were also asked at the time they enrolled in Taking Charge of Change to indicate their level of role competency. Sixty-one percent of directors reported that they now perceive themselves as master directors in contrast to the initial assessment of competency when only 5% viewed themselves as master directors.

Respondents were also asked to list two professional achievements they had accomplished as a result of the training. Participants mentioned pursuing goals that they previously did not think possible to achieve, such as going back to school, completing a college degree, obtaining the Illinois Director Credential, writing an article for publication, or starting a new center.

### The Impact of Training—Organizational Change

In addition to personal perceptions of change, this study also sought to determine whether participants were able to translate the theoretical concepts underpinning effective leadership into needed changes in their organizations to improve the quality of services for children and families.

**Self-report of programmatic changes.** The evaluation data collected at the beginning and end of each cohort's leadership training experience provide numerous examples of the program improvements that TCC participants had made at their respective centers, such as new staff orientation procedures, more consistent performance appraisal processes, and individualized professional development plans. In the online survey of TCC alumni, respondents provided additional examples of the concrete, specific changes they made in their programs and in their communities as a result of their participation in Taking Charge of Change, with one respondent reporting that

TCC made what could have been a very difficult situation—moving from a peer to a leader in my organization—a much easier process. Since graduating from the TCC program I have successfully led my organization through both QRS and accreditation.

**Leadership and management practices.** In addition to self-reports of program improvement efforts, this study also sought to verify these organizational outcomes with independent observations and assessment. Table 3 summarizes the findings of the pre- and post-PAS item scores. Also included in the table are the national norms for the five items assessed. The results of the data analyses revealed an increase in scores in all five items between the pre- and postadministration of the PAS. Statistically significant differences were found in three of the items: staff orientation, staff development, and family communications.

**Table 3**  
Pre- and Post-PAS Item Scores

PAS Item	Pre <i>M</i>	Post <i>M</i>	<i>t</i>	National <i>M</i>
Item 1: Staff Orientation	2.81	3.75	2.57*	2.88
Item 2: Supervision and Performance Appraisal	2.73	3.26	1.48	3.37
Item 3: Staff Development	3.32	4.21	2.54*	4.01
Item 9: Internal Communications	1.93	2.51	1.83	2.40
Item 16: Family Communications	2.81	4.07	3.47**	3.26

*Note:* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$

When comparing the average PAS item scores to the national averages for similar early childhood programs, the quality of leadership and management practices in TCC participants' programs was lower than the national average at the beginning of training. By the end of the training, however, the mean item scores were higher than the national average in four out of the five items assessed.

**Accreditation and QRS status.** The Taking Charge of Change model is designed to provide specific support to directors for making quality improvements to achieve center accreditation and a QRS rating for their programs. Data collected on each cohort showed that 27% of participants' programs were accredited at the beginning of training. At the end of the training cycle, 39% of programs were accredited. Of the TCC alumni responding to the online survey, 42% reported that their programs were accredited. This percentage is more than three times the rate of program accreditation in Illinois, where only 13% of early childhood programs are accredited.

In addition, 58% of alumni responding to the online survey reported that their center participates in Illinois' quality rating system. This percentage is more than three times the rate of QRS participation statewide. According to the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), at the time of this study (spring 2013), only 17% of licensed centers in Illinois had a QRS rating.

**Staff turnover.** The 69 respondents to the online survey who were directors ran centers with enrollments ranging from 18 to 513 children ( $M = 117$ ). They supervised more than 1,200 staff. The reported mean annual turnover rate was 12%, considerably lower than the turnover rate reported for the field nationally, which hovers around 30% (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). One-third of respondents indicated that they had no staff turnover during the preceding 12 months.

**Organizational climate and commitment to the center.** As the data in Table 4 show, overall perceptions of climate increased from the pre- to the postadministration of the ECWES in all 10 dimensions. In three dimensions (decision making, goal consensus, and innovativeness), these differences achieved statistical significance. In addition, changes in the overall organizational climate score were statistically significant.

**Table 4**  
Pre- and Post-Organizational Climate Dimension Scores

	Pre		Post		t
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	
Collegiality	6.91	1.38	7.12	1.35	1.64
Professional Growth	6.27	1.94	6.33	1.94	.34
Supervisor Support	7.46	1.48	7.55	1.31	.69
Clarity	6.58	1.45	6.81	1.54	1.64
Reward System	6.10	1.23	6.25	1.26	1.31
Decision Making	6.45	1.21	6.71	1.30	2.26*
Goal Consensus	6.82	1.15	7.15	1.23	3.02**
Task Orientation	6.90	1.81	7.08	1.26	1.67
Physical Setting	7.04	1.29	7.27	1.36	1.89
Innovativeness	6.92	1.20	7.21	1.20	2.60**
<b>Total Climate</b>	<b>67.39</b>	<b>10.73</b>	<b>69.48</b>	<b>11.32</b>	<b>2.06*</b>

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

The results of the ECWES analysis also revealed an increase in staff’s level of commitment to their centers. The data represented more than 3,000 employees who worked at the TCC participants’ programs. The mean for aggregate organizational commitment at the beginning of the leadership training program was 7.23. At the end of the 10-month program it was 7.40.

### Strengthening the Early Childhood Profession

The study also examined the potential of leadership training for promoting continuing professional development, commitment to the field, and mentoring of other early childhood administrators.

**Continuing professional development.** Sixty-four percent of respondents to the online survey indicated they had pursued formal college coursework since completing TCC, and 44% indicated they had gone on to achieve an undergraduate or graduate degree. Almost one-half of alumni (46%) reported having attained a credential since participating in TCC. Sixty-two alumni who responded to the online survey (45%) hold an Illinois Director Credential (IDC). Almost one-fourth (23%) of all practitioners in Illinois with an IDC have participated in TCC.

**Commitment to the field.** Of the 138 TCC alumni responding to the online survey, 128 (93%) continue to work in the field either as a director of a center-based program or in a related position supporting children and families. In addition, of the 128 alumni currently working in the field, 114 (89%) see themselves as continuing to work in early childhood five years from now.

**Mentoring others.** Sixty-five percent of alumni responding to the online survey indicated that they had mentored other directors. They described becoming professional development advisors for the state’s career development system, mentoring others to become credentialed. Others mentored newly hired directors in their agencies, and still others worked in paid consultative roles with directors in their community.

## Discussion

This study analyzed two decades of evaluation data collected from 502 TCC participants and their programs as well as recent data from an online survey of TCC alumni. Data analyses suggest that participation in TCC may have contributed to personal growth leading to the professional achievements of participants, such as attainment of degrees and credentials, and to program improvements resulting in positive program outcomes, such as achievement of national program accreditation and QRS status.

The analyses of archived data revealed significant increases in the participant’s knowledge and skills as well as significant improvements in their organizations’ work environments and in the level of administrative quality over a 10-month period. Participants’ reflections at the culmination of the leadership program revealed their perceptions of both personal and professional growth. These findings suggest that participating in the TCC model of leadership development increased the capacity of directors to apply newly attained knowledge and skills to

their leadership practice with staff and families within their centers. This enhanced leadership practice translated into improved program quality as measured by formal assessment using the ECWES and the PAS.

Data from the online survey showed that the majority of TCC alumni continue to be committed to the early childhood profession and to the ongoing quality improvement of early childhood programs they either administer or support. This study found that participants' programs had a lower rate of staff turnover, higher rates of accreditation, and higher rates of participation in the state's quality rating system than the norm, suggesting that participation in the TCC model of leadership development may have a long-lasting impact on the quality of participants' programs.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that participation in the TCC model is associated with positive personal and program outcomes, indicating that effective leadership development for directors of center-based early childhood programs should be systematic, intensive, and relevant.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While data from this study was compared with state and national data, this study did not include a control group and researchers did not control for possible confounding variables; therefore, caution should be used when generalizing the results of the findings. An additional limitation of this study is the missing data on the current job status, commitment to the field, and program quality outcomes for the TCC alumni who could not be located or who chose not to respond to the survey.

Research is needed examining other models of early childhood leadership training, looking at both short- and long-term outcomes associated with such training models. A key element of the TCC model is its emphasis on both the leadership and management functions of the director's role as a change agent. In the TCC model, leadership functions relate to the broad view of helping an organization clarify and affirm values, set goals, articulate a vision, and chart a course of action to achieve that vision. Management functions relate to the orchestration of tasks and the setting up of systems to carry out the organization's mission. Leadership and management content are intentionally woven together throughout the TCC training. An important research question is whether a focus solely on leadership or management content would achieve similar personal and organizational outcomes.

Additionally, research to determine the relative value of different components of the TCC model—the curriculum focused on understanding and managing change at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels; the facilitated professional learning community; and the mentoring support provided participants—would provide policymakers with information on which elements of the TCC model are most critical for empowering directors to become change agents committed to the ongoing, continuous quality improvement of their programs.

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