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## Preface

High-quality early care and education is essential for children's healthy development and school readiness. Yet too few children and families have access to the quality care and early learning experiences that matter most. This is a pivotal moment in the development of the early care and education (ECE) profession for accelerating improvement and innovation to advance the field. Professional, government, and philanthropic groups all have major initiatives under way to improve ECE quality and strengthen the workforce; however, a focus on leadership development—engaging early educators as change agents—is missing from most of the current approaches to advancing the field.

Leadership is the next frontier in ECE. This book argues that leadership is an essential and untapped lever for change, with the potential to transform opportunities and outcomes for young children and their families. Early educators have unique expertise and knowledge from their daily interactions and relationships with young children and families. Any effort to effect change must tap into and elevate that expertise to inform and drive improvement and innovation. While holding great promise, leadership for change is a relatively unexplored, invisible, yet crucial dimension of the field. Few opportunities or systems exist to develop and support leadership from within the ECE workforce. All too often, early educators have been seen as the objects of change, rather than the architects and co-creators of change.

In this book, I adopt a definition of *leadership* as a process of influencing change in order to achieve a shared goal. Leaders engage in the process of driving change to achieve a positive, desired outcome. Leadership can be exercised by individuals and groups at all levels, regardless of formal titles or roles (Fletcher, 2004; Gittel & Douglass, 2012). Early education leaders can make a lasting difference in the lives of children and families. But for decades now the early care and education field repeatedly has identified the need for substantially increased attention to leadership development (Goffin, 2013; Kagan & Bowman, 1997). What is still missing is an intentional and deliberate system in ECE for cultivating, supporting, and nurturing the leadership of early educators.

My goal is to unleash the possibilities of leadership within the field, from the development of individual leaders, to leadership in teams and programs,

to a field-wide ecosystem that cultivates and nurtures leaders. Getting real about early educator leadership—what it looks like, why it matters, and how we strengthen it—is the major contribution of this book. Many have called for leadership from within the field, but as of yet we have not systematically established a set of concrete steps for getting there, for helping our field and others see what it looks like or how to do it.

I am speaking to many audiences: educators, students, and all those who design, implement, and study programs and policies to support the ECE workforce and strengthen quality. I offer a research-based, theory-driven framework for developing and nurturing innovative, entrepreneurial, and skilled early educator leaders to drive transformative change—from classrooms and home-based programs to communities and beyond. Further, I call for a leadership development ecosystem that has the capacity to cultivate the leadership needed to address the challenge and transformative opportunity that we face.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to all of the early educators whom I've had the privilege to teach and work alongside over the past 25 years. I am especially grateful to the graduates of my Leadership and Change course at UMass Boston. These smart, creative, caring, and passionate early childhood educators inspired me to write this book. Their relentless pursuit of a better world for young children and families is a force for hope and transformative change, and a story that must be told. Over the years I have been blessed with many mentors, wise colleagues, partners, and collaborators who helped shape the ideas that became this book, including Sister Margaret Leonard at Project Hope in Boston, Lynne Mendes at UMass Boston, Jen Agosti at JRA Consulting, Gina Scaramella at the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center, Jody Hoffer Gittell at Brandeis University, Kim Syman at New Profit, and most recently Banu Özkazanç-Pan at UMass Boston. They have influenced me in immeasurable ways and have my deepest gratitude. I am equally grateful to my whole family for their support, patience, and ongoing feedback on this book, and to my parents, Jane and Gordon Douglass, who planted the seeds of social and economic justice and educational opportunity.

## Developing Leadership Within

### The Next Frontier of Early Care and Education

High-quality early care and education helps children grow, learn, and thrive. This is true across the ECE mixed-delivery system that includes family child care, Head Start, center-based child care, and school-based preschool programs. Quality ECE enhances early learning and school readiness and helps prevent opportunity and achievement gaps (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Leading economists tout ECE as one of the best public investments, with a high return on investment and a proven track record of promoting community and economic development and vitality (Heckman, 2012). Expectations are high for the long-lasting benefits of early care and education.

However, while the benefits for young children and families depend on the quality of the education they receive, many ECE programs do not have access to the resources needed to reach recognized thresholds for high quality. Moreover, research shows disturbing inequities in children's access to quality ECE. For example, a nationally representative study reported that African American children received the lowest-quality ECE (Hillemeier, Morgan, Farkas, & Maczuga, 2013). The most widely used criteria for defining quality include accreditation standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association for Family Child Care, states' Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) standards, and the most recognized measures of classroom quality, such as the Environmental Rating Scales (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2005, 2007). Reaching these benchmarks has been a persistent challenge, limiting the potential for ECE to deliver on its promise (Adams, Tout, & Zaslow, 2007; Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007; Tout, Epstein, Soli, & Lowe, 2015; Wesley & Buysse, 2010). The reasons for this persistent problem are complex. One key reason is the subject of this book: the leadership development gap in early care and education. This chapter describes the challenges and the opportunity for strengthening our field through the leadership of early educators. It introduces the research and theoretical foundations for this book's solution to the leadership development and quality gaps.

## THE PROBLEM

The dearth of attention paid to leadership in ECE undermines the field's capacity to design and deliver the care that makes a difference for children and families most in need. Almost no systems exist to develop and support ECE leadership (Goffin, 2013; Wise & Wright, 2012). Low compensation continues to undermine the field, in both supporting and retaining experienced educators and leaders. Limited resources in ECE tend to go to direct services or entry-level workforce development, without addressing the systemic issues that keep us from ensuring that all young children have access to high-quality early learning and care.

Professional development and quality improvement systems can be designed to promote the leadership of early educators in order to drive changes in practice, but currently they fail to do so. We have not yet applied the deep body of evidence from improvement science about what it takes to make measurable and sustained improvements in quality. In addition, relational organizational science documents the profound ways in which workplace relationships influence a wide range of organizational outcomes. Yet this science also has not been widely applied in ECE. These are missed opportunities.

We have long known from other sectors, such as healthcare and K–12 education, that effective leadership at all levels is a key ingredient for achieving positive outcomes (Berwick, 1994). The recently released Institute of Medicine report on transforming the ECE workforce acknowledges the importance of leadership and calls for leadership development as one of its 13 recommendations (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Unlike many other professionals, experienced early educators lack opportunities to grow throughout their careers and to develop the skills and supports they need to lead in their classrooms, organizations, communities, and beyond (Ramgopal, Dieterle, Aviles, McCreedy, & Davis, 2009; Taba et al., 1999). Investments in the teaching workforce are diminished when early childhood programs lack experienced leaders at all levels to support and retain good teachers and promote a culture of continuous quality improvement. Failing to nurture leadership from within can drive experienced and innovative thinkers from a field and interfere with the potential to deliver on its promise.

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Diverse, skilled, and creative leaders within the field are essential drivers of the transformative change urgently needed in ECE now. The scale of the ECE field and of its potential leadership impact is immense. Today, most children in the United States under the age of 5 are cared for in ECE settings, such

#### FOUNDATIONAL BUILDING BLOCKS

- the science of change and improvement
- relational leadership and relational organizational science
- entrepreneurial leadership and innovation

as child care, preschool, family child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, and early childhood programs in public schools. Many children are cared for in ECE 40 to 50 hours a week, often over a period of several years. Early educators constitute 30% of the entire U.S. instructional workforce from early childhood to postsecondary education (National Research Council, 2012). They are the most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse sector of the education workforce from birth to postsecondary education. The diversity of this workforce is an asset, and cultivating diverse leadership is essential to the future of the field.

For the field to fulfill its mission and potential, it needs a bold new approach to leadership development. What will it take to develop this leadership? For the past 8 years, I have been studying innovations in ECE quality improvement and professional development, and designing models that operate from a set of assumptions different from those of “business as usual.” Some might consider them “*disruptive innovations*” (Christensen, Johnson, & Horn, 2008)—a term used to characterize innovations that offer an alternative to the existing way of doing things, often by challenging the status quo. These innovations target gaps or offer something that may not yet be offered as a solution to a problem, either persistent or new. These models may be new in the ECE sector, but they have roots in sectors and disciplines where these approaches are more developed and widely used. These models are now being adapted and tested in ECE in ways that are strengthening leadership for change.

#### WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS BOOK

Developing leadership from within our field is an untapped lever for transforming the ECE landscape, strengthening our workforce, and ensuring that all young children and their families thrive. This book applies a multidisciplinary lens to examine theory and research on leadership, change, improvement, and innovation. Rooted in this transdisciplinary analysis, it offers a new way of thinking about how ECE can—and must—cultivate a culture of diverse, innovative, and entrepreneurial leadership. It delves into this solution with a focus on three foundational building blocks, each supported by a rich body of evidence and theory from across disciplines.



Each of these components is explored in one Part of the book. The first Part presents the research and theoretical foundation, the second gives in-depth examples of how new leadership pathways are being tested and used, and the third proposes a new leadership development ecosystem for ECE.

### **The Research Foundations of Leadership for Change**

New research and theory emerging in the relational and positive organizational sciences offers important evidence and insights about how to promote positive change and improve quality. Positive relationships, characterized by mutual respect and shared power, are key ingredients for successful change and improvement.

In the past, management science may have failed to offer relevant insights for the highly relationship-based context of ECE and similar human services sectors. What could the best practices from the automobile or airline industry possibly have to offer ECE? It turns out that some of the most powerful findings about the impact of positive relationships in the workplace have come out of research in these industries, showing that positive relationships matter in many sectors, such as business, health, education, and the military (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Gittell, 2003; Gittell & Douglass, 2012).

A fascinating new body of research explores the role that relationships play in high-performing organizations across many diverse sectors and industries (Gittell, 2016). This research shows that positive relationships of mutual respect and shared power contribute to a wide range of positive outcomes, including quality; improvement and organizational learning; employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention; and client satisfaction and outcomes. This research points to the importance of relationships for cross-sector, cross-role professional collaboration, which is increasingly important in the transdisciplinary teams in which early educators work with family support, social work, mental health, early intervention, or other specialists. Organizations intentionally can promote and sustain these positive relationships by creating a relational system (Gittell & Douglass, 2012).

An important implication for early care and education is that designing organizations and systems with these relational structures can enable educators to be active agents of change and improvement (Douglass, 2014). This is a science that has yet to be applied in the ECE context, and this book explains why and how we must leverage this knowledge now to advance leadership, improvement, and innovation in the field.

A second relevant body of research comes from the science of improvement, a field that has figured prominently in the healthcare sector, contributing to breakthrough improvements in quality (Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2003). Improvement science calls into question

the typical approaches to quality improvement, ones used frequently in ECE and many other sectors, that often fail to achieve the desired results. As I describe in the first part of the book, insights from improvement science reveal that leading real and sustained change in organizations and systems is a highly relational team process in which groups of people involved at different levels of the work process must together co-create solutions that work in that local context. The co-creation process requires the engagement and leadership of early educators, as well as the formal leadership in ECE programs.

We do not need to reinvent the wheel to fix the persistent challenges we face. We have a history of women's leadership in our field and a long line of calls to develop and support diverse leadership from within (Goffin & Washington, 2007; Hinitz, 2013; Kagan & Bowman, 1997). We can benefit from the recent scientific advances in other fields and experiment with how best to apply those lessons to advance progress in our own field.

### **Leadership Pathways: Seeing the Possibilities of Leadership**

By applying lessons on leadership and change from across our own and other disciplines, we can learn how to support and nurture a strong, diverse, and resilient workforce to lead change, improvement, and innovation in ECE. To do so, we must believe, and show the world, not only that early educators' leadership is possible, but that early educators possess unique knowledge and insights that are essential for understanding *how* to change and improve ECE.

For too long now, educators have been seen as the objects of change, rather than the architects and co-creators of change. This book reveals powerful stories of early educator leadership. Bringing these stories, and the possibility of early educator leadership, to the forefront is a transformative act in and of itself. It makes visible the leadership pathways of others and thus opens up new possibilities for leading. I have found that the idea of early educators as leaders and drivers of change is inconceivable to many both within and outside of our field, something I attribute to the deficit-oriented narrative about our field and our workforce, as well as persistent gender bias about leadership.

Part of the goal of professionalizing the field is not only to cultivate our own and our field's capacity to lead and drive change, but also to shift perceptions around our capacity to lead. We are bombarded with discouraging or negative messages about change and our workforce, and the messages in the headlines tend to focus on problems and deficits, rather than strengths. We rarely hear about the amazing and diverse leaders in ECE, or the ways we are resilient in change and persist in efforts to better serve children and families.