

# DEC POSITION STATEMENT

## Leadership in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education

Promoting high-quality leadership at all levels of the early  
intervention / early childhood special education service systems.

### Introduction

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) believes that high-quality leadership should be developed and supported at all levels of service systems in early intervention / early childhood special education (EI/ECSE). The service systems within which we work are highly complex and are composed of a single entity or multiple entities. They are administered by many different agencies<sup>1</sup> (e.g., education, health, human services), funded through numerous sources, and governed by multiple federal and state laws. EI/ECSE program administrators and practitioners are expected to work collaboratively across system, disciplinary, and program boundaries to support the optimal development of young children who have, or are at risk for, developmental delays/disabilities and their families. To do so effectively, personnel at all levels of EI/ECSE service systems must demonstrate individual and collective leadership skills.

**DEC believes the EI/ECSE field should *purposefully build and sustain leadership capital* across all aspects of practice.**

The varied calls for leadership in the EI/ECSE literature over the past 20 years underline a need to *purposefully build and sustain leadership capital* across all domains of practice, from the national level through the CEO/administrator agency level to the direct service provider level (Bailey, 2000; Garwood, 1987; Keilty, LaRocco, & Casell, 2009; Steed, Noh, & Heo, 2014). *Leadership capital* is human capacities and organizational cultures that support “active engagement in leadership tasks” (Research Center for Leadership in Action, n.d., p. 1). Like other forms of capital (physical, financial, technological, social, human), leadership capital is dynamic and can be shaped, built, or drained and used effectively or ineffectively.

Moreover, having high-quality leadership enhances the ability of an organization, agency, or program to meet its goals (Yukl, 2013).

Kagan (2013) described leadership as individuals engaging colleagues in “reflective, dynamic, value-based planning and organizing that provides vision, inspiration, structure and direction” (p. 34). In EI/ECSE, the individuals “can be program directors and other administrators, practitioners, family members, students, higher education faculty, and others” (Division for Early Childhood, 2014, p. 5). While the fields of EI/ECSE and early childhood education do not have a consensus definition of leadership (Goffin & Janke, 2013; Kagan & Bowman, 1997; Rodd, 1996), conceptualizations of leadership from other fields can inform our thinking (see Avolio, 2011; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2011; Yukl, 2013). *Leadership* as used here is defined as the proactive process of influencing others “to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations—the wants and needs, aspirations and expectations—of *both leaders and followers*” (Burns, 1978, p. 19). The *goal* of EI/ECSE is to assist infants and young children with developmental delays/disabilities and their families to meet developmental and behavioral outcomes that will enhance their quality of life (Bruder, 2010).

DEC believes it is necessary to emphasize the differences between leadership and management as they are not the same. Some who write about leadership and management in the field of EI/ECSE have blended the concepts together, drawing few distinctions between the two (E. A. Shore & H. H. Shore, 1999; Taylor, McGowan, & Linder, 2009). Others have noted that the distinctions between leadership and management in early childhood education are rarely made (Rous, 2004) and have emphasized important differences between the concepts (Aubrey, 2007; Rodd, 2013).

Acknowledging and describing the differences between leaders and managers as they apply to directors of early care and education programs, Culkin (1997) wrote, “management is one responsibility of an administrator; leadership is another” (p. 24). Put simply, managers have formal authority and status in an organization (Mintzberg, 2011), and they ordinarily focus on the day-to-day operations of programs. Although a manager’s role and responsibilities can vary from organization to organization, the work generally includes decision-making about programmatic objectives, strategies, procedures, and resources (Yukl, 2013); maintaining programmatic order and consistency in areas such as planning, policies, and budgeting (Northouse, 2013); and supervising program personnel (Culkin, 1997; Rodd, 2013).

Given the complexities of the EI/ECSE systems and the need for program administrators and practitioners to work collaboratively across disciplinary and program boundaries, DEC believes the field should deliberately engage in identifying specific competencies necessary to be an effective leader as well as the organizational cultures necessary to promote and

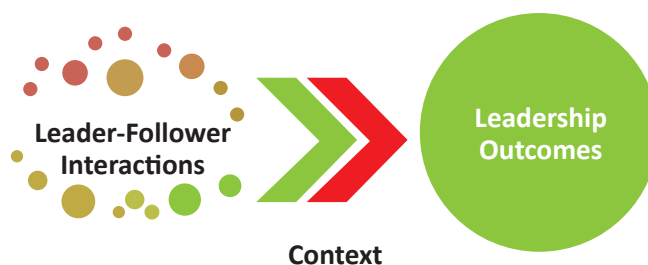
sustain high-quality leadership in EI/ECSE. Describing the many ways in which leadership can be expressed in early childhood education, Kagan and Bowman (1997) offered a typology of leadership that encompasses five forms—community, conceptual, pedagogical, advocacy, and administrative—that suggest areas for competency development. Community leadership focuses on building local understanding of the importance of early childhood education and influencing policy creation and resource allocation. Conceptual leadership looks beyond single program interests and works collaboratively across disciplinary boundaries and stakeholder groups to identify societal benefits of early childhood education and think about future possibilities. Pedagogical leadership connects teaching and learning research with practice and back again so each informs the other. Advocacy leadership works collaboratively to proactively inform and influence local, state, and federal policies. Administrative leadership focuses on the management of early childhood organizations. Taken together, the five forms of leadership illustrate the necessity of building leadership capital at all levels of EI/ECSE service systems. The typology also suggests that leadership involves mutual influence and shared responsibility.

**DEC believes leadership in EI/ECSE is a *process* that involves *mutual influence* and *shared responsibility*.**

Leadership “does not happen alone, but actively involves the support of others” (Armstrong, Kinney, & Clayton, 2009, p. 15). DEC believes leadership is neither a role nor is it synonymous with a person’s official title, formal authority within an organization, job description, or assigned responsibilities. Leadership is not the sole responsibility of one individual, but rather it “lies alike with those who do and do not have formal positions of power and authority” (Crosby & Bryson, 2005, p. 29). DEC believes leadership is a *process* that involves *mutual influence* and *shared responsibility* (Maxwell, 2007; Yukl, 2013).

Many evidence-based leadership models have emphasized that an individual can influence others whether or not the individual has a specialized role or a formal position of power and authority (Avolio, 2011; Yukl, 2013). Further, most definitions of leadership emphasize influence as an important determinant of a leader’s effectiveness (Avolio, 2011; Hoy & Smith, 2007; Maxwell, 2007; Yukl, 2013).

The process of shared influence involves a person, the leader, some followers, and a context within which leader-follower interactions occur (Padilla, 2013). *Leader-follower interactions* encompass different people carrying out different leadership tasks, with one person (leader) “influencing others [followers] to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it” (Yukl, 2013, p. 7). The *context* affects the leader-follower interactions and the *leadership outcomes*, positive or negative. Figure 1 provides a graphic depiction of leadership as a process of mutual influence and shared responsibility set in context.



**Figure 1. Leadership as a process of mutual influence and shared responsibility set in context.**

Within EI/ECSE, the leadership context can take many forms, including a classroom, program, school, community, or home-based setting. For example, a parent can influence community members by sharing information that engages others in efforts to improve state-level special education policies to better meet the needs of eligible children and their families (Buysse, Wesley, & Skinner, 1999). A classroom teacher can exercise influence by modeling expected behaviors when interacting with students, sharing resources such as a journal article with colleagues, or listening to a family member’s concerns about their child’s progress (Armstrong et. al., 2009).

DEC believes the *culture* of the setting (e.g., agency or program) can either facilitate or impede opportunities for an individual to exhibit leadership (Armstrong et al., 2009; Padilla, 2013). Culture encompasses a set of basic assumptions that a group shares about how the world is, or should be (Schein, 1984, 1996). As Bolman and Deal (2008) explained, “culture forms the superglue that bonds an organization, unites people, and helps an enterprise accomplish desired ends” (p. 253). DEC supports the creation of organizational cultures where high-quality leadership can be cultivated, supported, and sustained.

**DEC believes the EI/ECSE field should *conduct research to collect evidence about the construct and demonstration of leadership skills across EI/ECSE service systems.***

Leadership theories, models, and related research to inform leadership development in EI/ECSE are plentiful in the business literature (see Northouse, 2013). Likewise, the knowledge base on effective school leadership is also informative (see Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Wallace Foundation, 2011; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). To document, understand, and make connections to the available evidence on leadership in EI/ECSE, a search of academic literature was conducted. An initial search of several electronic databases (Academic Search Premier, ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest, JSTOR Arts and Sciences I) using various combinations of descriptors (e.g., Part C, early intervention, early childhood special education, and leader) resulted in few resources. A second more exhaustive search of three EI/ECSE peer-reviewed journals was conducted. The journals were *Infants and Young Children*, *Journal of Early Intervention*, and *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, and the search covered 30 years of publication (1985 to 2014).

Using each journal's advanced search function, 33 articles that had the term *leader* or its derivatives (*leaders*, *leading*, or *leadership*) in the abstract were uncovered. Of identified articles, half did not address matters of leadership in EI/ECSE and the remaining articles were largely descriptive in nature with many combining the concept of management and leadership. Only six empirical investigations focused solely on leadership in EI/ECSE were identified, and they had multiple and varied foci.

Most research about effective leadership behaviors examined the perceptions of those who were in positions of authority and/or leadership positions in programs serving young children (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001; Epley, Gotto, Summers, Brotherson, Turnbull & Friend, 2010; Morgan, Guetzloe, & Swan, 1991; Rous, 2004). Results suggested that leadership for interagency coordination requires adaptability and a balance between a focus on relationships and accomplishing the work (Morgan et al., 1991). Findings also revealed that having background in, and knowledge of, early childhood special education was considered an essential leadership asset (Brotherson et al., 2001; Epley et al., 2010; Rous, 2004). Lastly, research also suggests that leadership knowledge and skills can be learned as evidenced by reports from leadership trainees post training (Buyse et al., 1999; Magyary & Brandt, 2005).

Several articles described the usefulness of applying business leadership models to EI/ECSE (Browne, VandenBerg, Ross, & Elmore, 1999; Lay-Dopyera & Dopyera, 1985; E. A. Shore & H. H. Shore, 1999; Swan, 1985) and argued that being a leader requires a range of skills suited to the context (Lay-Dopyera & Dopyera, 1985). Authors noted the importance of being able to plan and organize (E. A. Shore & H. H. Shore, 1999) and having strong skills for monitoring, advocating, and facilitating (Swan, 1985). Valued leadership competencies also included having a clear purpose, being able to develop a shared vision for the service delivery system (Ploof & Feldman, 1992), building trust relationships, taking risks, and collaborating (Apter, 1994). Furthermore, descriptions of early intervention structures hinted at the importance of being able to navigate the intricacies of EI/ECSE systems as a key skill for leadership in the field (Apter, 1994; Ploof & Feldman, 1992; Weston, Ivins, Heffron & Sweet, 1997).

While this body of work is somewhat informative, the wide-ranging emphases of these works and the paucity of large empirical investigations of leadership in EI/ECSE are quite limiting. Simply, there is little written about effective approaches or models for how best to build, support, and sustain leadership capital across all domains of practice and levels of EI/ECSE systems. Further, there is an apparent need for related research to build a base of evidence in areas such as efficacious models of leadership and leadership development. Therefore, DEC believes the EI/ECSE field should conduct research on the construct and demonstration of leadership skills, and building and sustaining leadership capital across EI/ECSE service systems.

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