



# ECE SOLUTIONS

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## Entrepreneurial Leadership Training Catalyzes Change Initiatives in Early Ed Programs

*In “Preparing early educators as frontline leaders and change agents with a leadership development initiative,”<sup>[i]</sup> UMass Boston researchers show that early educators who participated in a relational-entrepreneurial leadership development program were likely to lead for change in curriculum improvement, family engagement, and relationship building after completing their training. These findings suggest that relational-entrepreneurial leadership training has the potential to tap into early educators’ proprietary knowledge about caring for and educating very young children that are not known to those outside the field. Consequently, findings from this study are deeply relevant to current debate among early educators, parents, and policymakers about how to make affordable, high quality early care and education accessible to all families.*

### **Relational-entrepreneurial leadership training**

In this study, relational-entrepreneurial leadership training was delivered through Leading for Change, a 40-hour relational-entrepreneurial leadership development program delivered over 15 weeks. The curriculum was designed specifically for early educators who would continue to work while participating in the training and who hold all roles and positions and work in all program types in the mixed delivery system of early care and education. It was also designed to cultivate racially and linguistically diverse leadership from the early care and education workforce. Leading for Change is organized around three components that are essential for increasing early educators’ capacity to lead for change in early care and education programs.

#### **Increasing knowledge**

Leading for Change begins with extensive reading about leadership, entrepreneurship, and change theories from a variety of disciplines, including management, nursing, healthcare, and education. Participants engaged in discussion groups focused on understanding the concepts and application of these theories to the context of early

childhood education. Instructors facilitated discussion using appreciative inquiry techniques, which have been shown to be a method for supporting the development of relational leadership.<sup>[ii]</sup> This new knowledge about leadership and system change resulted in a greater degree of reflective practices, collaboration, efficacy, and innovative approaches that develop early educators’ capacity and skill to be change agents and frontline leaders.

#### **Developing an entrepreneurial leadership mindset**

Throughout the 15-week course, participants learned how to cultivate an entrepreneurial leadership mindset, which is characterized by creative and innovative thinking, problem-solving, and seeking new, better, and more adaptive solutions to complex problems.<sup>[iii]</sup> An entrepreneurial mindset can be fostered by shifting perceptions of what it means to be a leader. Traditional notions of leadership typically focus on individual leader traits or attributes and a form of leadership that emphasizes command and control, power, hierarchy, and decisiveness.<sup>[iv],[v]</sup> But understanding leadership

(continued)

as a process of influencing or motivating groups of people to work together toward change, to accomplish a goal or solve a problem can tap into educators' abilities and potentials to become leaders in the ECE field.

### Learning strategies to enact change

Taking actions to drive change requires the capacity to mobilize, orchestrate, and deploy resources, supports, and information in a dynamic and adaptive manner.<sup>[iv]</sup> Leading for Change equipped participants to do this by having them develop an action plan for a change they wanted to make in early education, either in their workplace, community, or in the larger system. The first step in the action plan was examining existing research about a topic of their choosing to build a basis for why the change needed to occur. Next, they developed a theory of change driven by knowledge, experience, beliefs, and assumptions concerning how and why people change, and what can motivate or support them to do so. Finally, they created a plan for how they would implement the change, what type of leadership would be needed to do so, and the role they would play in bringing the plan to fruition.

### Study Participants

Thirty-one early educators participated in this study. Nearly all (93.5%) were female and ranged in age from 24 to 68 years old. Nearly half (42.9%) were fluent in languages other than English; 37% were White, 25.9% were Black, 18.5% were Asian, 7.4% were Hispanic/Latinx, and 11.1% were other races. Participants held positions throughout the field ranging from assistant teacher to center director and worked in all program types including centers, schools, and family child care programs.

### Results and Implications for the Field

Surveys filled out by participants before and after completing Leading for Change showed significant increases in their self-perception as leaders and change agents. Participants

also demonstrated significant increases in leadership competencies ranging from having the “respect of my colleagues” to having “gained knowledge about implementing change.” Participants reported having initiated change projects largely focused on teaching and curriculum improvement, family engagement, and relationship building. Included among these projects were actions designed to promote instructional quality, create a positive workplace and organizational climate, build community partnerships, and establish effective organizational structures in the workplace.

This study provides the first evidence on which approaches, features, and leadership practices can lead to improved outcomes for staff, program quality, and children. It shows that relational-entrepreneurial leadership development can provide early educators with the tools to create innovative solutions to the persistent challenges to quality improvement in early care and education settings.

[i] Lee, Y., Douglass, A., Zeng, S. et al. Preparing early educators as frontline leaders and change agents with a leadership development initiative. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 16, 2 (2022). [doi.org/10.1186/s40723-022-00095-z](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-022-00095-z).

[ii] Sim, J. H. (2019). Exploring the relational leadership potential of appreciative inquiry: A case study. *South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases* 8(1), 47–57. [journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2277977918803217](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2277977918803217).

[iii] Douglass, A. (2018). Redefining leadership: Lessons from an early education leadership development initiative. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(4), 387-396.

[iv] Fletcher, J. K. (2004). The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(5), 647–661. [doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.07.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.07.004).

[v] Gittell, J.H.; Douglass, A. (2012). Embedding reciprocal relationships into roles: the relational bureaucratic form. *Academy of Management Review*, 37(4) 709–733.

[vi] Quinn, R. E. (2004). Building the bridge as you walk on it: A guide for leading change. Jossey-Bass.

ECE Solutions: Entrepreneurial Leadership Training Catalyzes Change Initiatives in Early Ed Programs is one in a series of policy briefs summarizing original research by the Leadership Institute that is generating new knowledge and accelerating creative and critical thinking about leadership and innovation in the field of early care and education

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