



Early Childhood Leaders on Leadership

Interviews conducted by **Denise M. Scott**

In their book *Children of 2010*, Valora Washington and J.D. Andrews issue a wake-up call to those who work with children, families, and policy makers, as well as anyone and everyone who cares about the next generation of children. They also recognize that there is hope for a bright future—hope that is contingent upon meeting the increased need for united commitment and involvement.

We asked several early childhood leaders to briefly state their views on leadership by responding to several questions about the path to leadership. Their responses may inspire others to start on that path and develop their leadership qualities.

Dina Clark Rodriguez

Director of Agency Relations
The Mentoring Partnership of
Southwestern Pennsylvania
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Denise M. Scott: *How well are we doing in creating an environment in which leaders can thrive?*

Dina Clark Rodriguez: One of the most important things we can do to nurture leaders is to create an atmosphere that encourages mentoring and learning. Seasoned professionals need to reach out to those entering the field.

NAEYC is on the right track. The Association should continue to build on current initiatives, like hosting a student welcome and orientation at the Annual Conference and using the Affiliate structure to support students via student clubs, sponsor fundraising activities, and establish ongoing connections to NAEYC members and other professionals in the field. There should be a student component in all our work that encourages leadership opportunities and ensures the connectivity of all elements within the field.

Denise M. Scott, MA, is senior director for leadership development at NAEYC. She has worked in the field of early care and education for more than 25 years at multiple levels, from teacher's aide to senior management staff.

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DMS: *As a leader in the field of early care and education, how did you go about getting others to follow?*

DCR: For me, it's about outreach. If you have a message, you must respectfully connect with people. Listen to them and try to understand what they may be facing. By listening together you can develop a plan for change. Effective outreach takes time. But once you have invested the initial time, it will come back to benefit the field. It's all about building and strengthening connections.

DMS: *When did you first realize you were a leader? Were you born a leader, or did you grow into the role?*

DCR: In school, although I had no official title, I was an outspoken leader. I would go up to people having a hard time, connect with them, and remind them of their own leadership qualities. We are all leaders. It is important to recognize that we all have leadership qualities, regardless of our titles.

I felt like a leader the first time I was teaching in the classroom, but clearly in a roomful of toddlers I was also a follower. No matter what my role is at any given moment, recognizing my ability to be a leader and a follower is empowering.

DMS: *What is your perspective on upside-down leadership?*

DCR: All good leaders should be able to both lead and follow. Effective leaders should recognize when each style is appropriate. Not all leaders hold leadership titles. Effective leadership is more than just a title. It's really about developing your leadership skills at each level. It involves recognizing your strengths and the strengths of others and building and utilizing those strengths.

DMS: *What about the leadership pipeline? What types of changes are needed to clear the way for emerging leaders?*

DCR: I would like to see the well-known leaders in our field demonstrate a strong commitment to outreach. Let's remind the seasoned professionals to consciously connect with those entering the early care and education field. It's as simple as approaching someone who might be sitting alone at a table at a conference. Introduce yourself!

Connecting with others should be a clear role of the NAEYC staff and Governing Board and all who consider themselves leaders and professionals. Help close the gap between people new to the field and experienced professionals. Emphasize the importance of outreach and mentoring efforts. Make sure students have accurate and relevant information about what they are learning. Empower students wherever they are in their studies. Listen to students, value what they have to say, and build it into your work. Provide opportunities for students to share their experiences.

Be strong and stand behind your education, experiences, and perspective.

Know where your strengths are, know your differences, and know where you can bridge commonalities

We need to strengthen our connection with high school students interested in early care and education. More work with high school certification programs and increased mentoring efforts between high school and college students—that's what we need!

DMS: *What words of wisdom would you like to share with emerging leaders in the field?*

DCR: Be strong and stand behind your education, experiences, and perspective. Students, remember to reach out to the early care and education professionals. Don't be intimidated by not having your degree yet or not having years of experience, because your perspective is truly important and valued.

Mark Carter

Executive Director
The National AfterSchool
Association
Dorchester, MA

DMS: *How well are we doing in creating an environment in which leaders can thrive?*

MC: In our organization we go out of our way to ensure staff have opportunities to engage with experts in the field. For example, we

recently held a two-day training on accreditation. It was mainly for accreditation staff but open to the entire staff to help everyone see the big picture. Areas such as Annual Conference and accreditation serve as incubators for leadership development on a variety of levels. I have had many opportunities to come together with colleagues, advance my own professional development, explore new ideas, and open the door for others.

I think this field has an environment where leaders can thrive, although it is not an organized structure. For example, three or four of us try to identify the potential young leaders, and then create opportunities for them to shadow us, be on committees, and share our expertise. I can do this in a small way within my organization, but I don't see it happening with intentionality and purpose.

DMS: *As a leader in the field of early care and education, how did you go about getting others to follow?*

MC: Demonstrate that you are not interested in consolidating power, rather you want to open up opportunities for others so that different voices can be at the table. It's challenging because if your voice is outside the comfort zone of the majority of the people, then you either have to adjust to accommodate others or just stay the course assuming they will eventually understand. I think there is a balance.

The challenge then is to know where your strengths are, know your differences, and know where you can bridge commonalities that other people might have with you. Also, believe in the capacity of your own ideas. They may be different, so if they are not immediately embraced it does not make you a bad guy, it just means your ideas are different.

DMS: *When did you first realize you were a leader? Were you born a leader, or did you grow into the role?*

MC: If different people were sitting at this table, they might not use the word *leader*. They might say, "He's been a habitual troublemaker." I think you can be a leader and a troublemaker.

My parents are unique people who have always been involved in education. I have felt a certain kinship with young people—children and adolescents—and I

Find your moral compass and know that it may be contrary to how an organization works.

think I have radar about certain issues. There have been some interesting experiences in my life where I have drawn a line in the sand or assertively articulated a position that was contrary to conventional wisdom or majority opinion.

DMS: *What is your perspective on upside-down leadership?*

MC: I have been on different rungs of the ladder, but I've never felt constrained or forced to be submissive no matter where I stood on that ladder. I've always felt compelled to assert myself and articulate my opinion. So existentially and intellectually, I think the concept of upside-down leadership is great and makes good sense.

I like upside-down leadership and agree with it, but I have never worked in an organization where it was appreciated and valued. Conceptually it makes perfect sense, but are people really down for it? I try to create an organization in which I work to make that happen.

DMS: *What about the leadership pipeline? What types of changes are needed to clear the way for emerging leaders?*

MC: I think we (the collective *we*) have to decide if the changes we talk about are really the changes we want and value. It's one thing to say that we are looking for a certain type of leadership to emerge; it's another to say we are ready for it.

DMS: *What words of wisdom would you like to share with emerging leaders in the field?*

MC: Find your moral compass and know that it may be contrary to how an organization works. Understand that there are great rewards for leadership and incredible risks. Things have changed in the last five to ten years. There is the desire for new leadership and at the same time there may be a hostile reception if it falls outside the group's comfort zone.

Linda Likins

National Director
Devereux Early Childhood
Initiative
Villanova, Pennsylvania

DMS: *How well are we doing in creating an environment in which leaders can thrive?*

LL: There are great attempts being made, but we still fall short. Sometimes in the early childhood field, we have a tendency to talk to ourselves rather than go outside our sphere of influence. In the last 10 years we've seen a lot happen in the area of professional development, including legislation (such as Head Start) that promotes professional development. Mentoring is important. Leaders in early childhood education select individuals they see as potential leaders for their program, region, and state. Each of us needs to take responsibility in promoting leadership.

DMS: *As a leader in the field of early care and education, how did you go about getting others to follow?*

LL: I've always been told by others that they can see my passion for my work. But I realized the need to get out of my immediate professional circle. Running for a local school board was a turning point for me. It allowed me to incorporate the knowledge and interpersonal skills gained from the early childhood

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arena. I believe that leading is about being passionate, believing in what you're doing, talking to those you are responsible for leading as well as others within the community.

DMS: *When did you first realize you were a leader? Were you born a leader, or did you grow into the role?*

LL: I grew into it. I always felt very strongly about my work. I remember my reaction to receiving my first paycheck. As the principal handed it to me, I thought, "Oh, I forgot I get paid for this." That's how much I loved my work.

DMS: *What is your perspective on upside-down leadership?*

LL: While I worked at the state Department of Education, the governor made it his business to find out who had the best fried chicken in Kentucky. Upon entering a restaurant, there was a sign that said "Best fried chicken in Kentucky—One piece per customer." When the governor asked for two pieces, he was directed to read the sign. He said, "Don't you know who I am? I am the governor of Kentucky!" to which the lady replied, "And don't you know who I am? I'm the lady in charge of the chicken."

This lady was the expert. She knew how to cook the best fried chicken in Kentucky. Many times teachers don't recognize that they are the experts. They need to feel good about themselves in their role as leader to children and families.

DMS: *What about the leadership pipeline? What types of changes are needed to clear the way for emerging leaders?*

LL: It seems like the field is "graying." Those of us who have been around for a long time need to make sure we are sharing our experiences and letting others know where we've come from and where are we now. We have to work to ensure that young leaders have the same kind of devotion and passion we do.

DMS: *What words of wisdom would you like to share with emerging leaders in the field?*

LL: The most encouraging thing I would say, though not very profound, is don't give up. Every day young teachers need to think of the impact they have made on a young child or family and how that can extend to hundreds or even thousands over the course of five to ten years. Their work with families and children is so important. Everyone they talk to—on the subway, in the grocery store—is a potential advocate for early childhood education. So don't hide your candle.

Deborah Eaton

Chief Operating Officer
for Accreditation
National Association of
Family Child Care
Salt Lake City, Utah

DMS: *How well are we doing in creating an environment in which leaders can thrive?*

DE: I believe we have made great strides. NAEYC has taken the lead in modeling a governance style of leadership that embraces diversity and inclusion, which in turn creates

an environment where leaders can thrive. However, we still have a lot of work to do in this area.

We need to get out in the trenches and identify emerging leaders who are representative of the early childhood teachers in the communities where they

We need to encourage these emerging leaders to join professional organizations, invite them to serve on committees, and let them know that they can make a difference in the lives of children.

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live. We need to encourage these emerging leaders to join professional organizations, invite them to serve on committees, and let them know that they can make a difference in the lives of children.

DMS: *As a leader in the field of early care and education, how did you go about getting others to follow?*

DE: I lead by example and by not being afraid to express my passion. In other words, I speak out for what I believe in. I have never allowed myself to think of myself or my profession as second class in any sense of the word. Likewise, I always spoke up if anyone wanted to pigeonhole me in a belief system that was outdated or incorrect.

DMS: *When did you first realize you were a leader? Were you born a leader, or did you grow into the role?*

DE: I was one of those children who are always assuming a leadership role. As an adult, I first realized I was a leader when I was voted president of my local family child care association. Following that, I was voted president of my AEYC section in California. Both organizations had over a thousand members at the time. After that, I began assuming national leadership roles.

It's funny now to reflect that I knew I was a leader before I realized that I was an advocate for young children. I think a lot of people in our profession are reluctant to think of themselves as advocates.

DMS: *What is your perspective on upside-down leadership?*

DE: I believe that we need to give individuals at every level an equal opportunity to become leaders.

I immediately think of Japan. I lived there for four years in the 1970s and took a college classes while there. One class taught me that the Japanese style of leadership is like an inverted pyramid. Individuals begin their growth as part of the leadership team. The time spent in developing needed skills moves them up the pyramid of success with others. This process continues until a person is at the top of the inverted pyramid with many others of like mind. There is the most room at the top for leaders to truly be a part of a leadership model. It is a perfect model for upside-down leadership.

DMS: *What about emerging leaders? Do you find them aggressive when it comes to pursuing their own professional development?*

DE: In my experience new leaders who tend to be aggressive about every issue frequently come across as militant. I've seen that that attitude does not serve them well in the end. It tends to stifle, not facilitate, their professional growth.

On the other hand, I believe there are times when emerging leaders should be aggressive in order to open doors of opportunity for professional development. For example, I've had to question leaders in our field about why family child care providers were left out of the loop or were not at the table when issues were discussed that would impact them. At times I've asked leaders to reconsider their boards or panels.

So I guess my message is for emerging leaders to consider when it is or is not in their best interest to be aggressive.

We need to make sure that every person in our leadership pipeline has an equal opportunity to pursue her or his professional growth, regardless of race, color, creed, or area of expertise.

DMS: *What about the leadership pipeline? What types of changes are needed to clear the way for emerging leaders?*

DE: Again we need to make sure that every person in our leadership pipeline has an equal opportunity to pursue her or his professional growth, regardless of race, color, creed, or area of expertise—that is, Head Start, family child care, school-age, church related, not-for-profit preschools, for-profit preschools, military environments, kindergarten classrooms, or any other early childhood setting.

In family child care, there seem to be a lot of association leaders who think that once they assume a leadership role, it is for life. We need to change that mentality because it holds us back. We must allow new leaders to have opportunities to express their views and ideas.

DMS: *What words of wisdom would you like to share with emerging leaders in the field?*

DE: I would tell them to believe in themselves and not to be afraid—to be bold when they find it necessary.

Rebecca Marcon

Department of Psychology
University of North Florida
Jacksonville, FL

DMS: *How well are we doing in creating an environment in which leaders can thrive?*

RM: I think we are doing an excellent job because everyone I have met in the field is

an extremely warm person and I don't see jealousy either personal or professional between people. We have a common mission and I have witnessed a great deal of support.

DMS: *As a leader in the field of early care and education, how did you go about getting others to follow?*

RM: First, by doing excellent work that contributes to the field. Others are curious about that work and want to know more about it. Second, by spending time with people, whether it be a graduate student or another leader or a practitioner. Taking personal time with an individual.

DMS: *When did you first realize you were a leader? Were you a born leader, or did you grow into the role?*

RM: Going back to childhood, people looked at me as a leader. For instance, students would drop out of the race when they found that I was running for office. In the field of early childhood, I think it came to me at Annual Conference, when people recognized my name and began to seek me out. Others saw the work I was doing and the impact it had on the field.

DMS: *What is your perspective on upside-down leadership?*

RM: Both levels of leadership are important. The person providing direct service will have the practical knowledge, ideas, and creativity but may miss the big picture. The person farthest removed from the action has to keep the big picture in mind. But both must listen to each other because both are valuable.

Others will want to be a part of what you are doing because you are having such fun.

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DMS: *What about the leadership pipeline? What types of changes are needed to clear the way for emerging leaders?*

RM: We have to be more aware of different cultures and recognize and nurture the differences in style. The most talkative person may not always be the best leader. It is important to bring out and nurture people's strengths and be willing to listen and spend time with them. We have to recognize each other's values.

DMS: *What words of wisdom would you like to share with emerging leaders in the field?*

RM: First, realize how important balance is, and be sure your definition of success includes each part of your life. Second, take a deep breath and be patient. If you are good at what you do and you know it, there will always be a place that will recognize your unique talent. Most important, have fun. It will show, and others will want to be a part of what you are doing because you are having such fun.