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Reconciling Leadership and Partnership: Strategies to Empower Professionals and Families

When early childhood professionals attempt to carry out traditional leadership roles at the same time they implement family-centered early care and education, they may find themselves in a quandary. A number of the assumptions associated with traditional leadership are not in harmony with family-centered practices, which include engaging families as partners with programs and teachers in their children's development and learning (Douglass & Gittell 2012). In their work with families, early childhood professionals often find themselves challenged by the need to be both leaders and partners.

The need for new conceptions about leadership

To advance effective family–professional partnerships, early childhood teachers must preserve the notion of caring in their professional culture (Hanson & Lynch 2013) while growing new forms of leadership (Douglass & Gittell 2012). How can early childhood practitioners ensure that they develop empowering partnerships with families while cultivating their own ability to lead? The answer in large part can be found in servant leadership.

Greenleaf (2002) defines servant leadership in the following way.

> The servant-leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . . The best test is this: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (27)

Servant leaders focus on the needs and goals of others, including coworkers, families, and children (Sullivan 2010). Empirically researched and theoretically grounded, the concept of servant leadership recognizes that serving others through practices *is* leadership (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora 2008; Sullivan 2010). This article presents an approach to servant leadership and offers recommendations early childhood practitioners can use to work effectively as servant leaders while collaborating with families.

Key Questions About Leadership and Their Implications for Early Childhood

	Traditional model	Servant leadership model
Who can be a leader?	■ A select few with a transcendent vision and charismatic presence *This model limits leadership and makes it seem unattainable.*	■ Anyone willing to serve *This model recognizes that teachers and practitioners are already leaders.*
What does leadership look like?	■ An elected or appointed position with high visibility and prestige; an executive position *This model promotes hierarchical practices.*	■ Ongoing service and care for others *This model recognizes the potential for leadership to take place in everyday teaching practices.*
How is leadership maintained?	■ Through power over others *This model promotes competition and individual success. It emphasizes authority.*	■ Through power shared with others *This model emphasizes collaboration and communal success. It includes and empowers others.*
What are the significant characteristics of a leader?	■ Extraordinary attributes, skills, and expertise *This model prevents practitioners from seeing themselves as leaders unless they take on the role of expert.*	■ Voluntary subordination, authentic self, responsible morality *This model focuses on willingness and abilities for establishing partnerships with others.*

The traditional leadership model

A business, or traditional, model of leadership conflicts with many basic values of family-centered practice. This model emphasizes competition over collaboration and limits the potential for practitioners to see themselves as leaders in their daily work (Sullivan 2010). When early childhood teachers presume that leadership is reserved for a select few based on their extraordinary gifts, talents, and advanced training, it is not surprising that few practitioners envision themselves as leaders (Sullivan 2010). Similarly, when teachers expect leaders to provide a transcendent vision and wield great power, it seems unlikely that teachers see themselves in this role as they wrestle with the daily challenges of implementing family-centered care. "Key Questions About Leadership and Their Implications for Early Childhood" illustrates a number of the assumptions associated with a traditional leadership model, in contrast to principles associated with servant leadership.

Some misconceptions about leadership in early childhood education have been reinforced over the past decade with growing bureaucratic demand for teacher and school accountability. This movement toward accountability has professionalized the field, replacing the idea of child care with more formalized early care and education (Kagan & Kauerz 2007; Douglass & Gittell 2012). When policy makers hold teachers and programs accountable for what young children do and do not learn (e.g., reading, social skills), the teachers and programs may seek more power because they presume that asserting their expertise is necessary to meet standards or guidelines. But if early childhood programs try to cultivate the power over others that is synonymous with traditional leadership, they limit their ability to develop shared power with families, children, and other professionals at the heart of family-centered practice.

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Pressures to adopt a "professional culture"

Several other factors contribute to the challenges of being a leader in early childhood education settings while providing family-centered care. Many preservice professional programs encourage their candidates to see themselves as having expert knowledge (Skrtic 2005). Such expertise typically contributes to an implicit assumption that the professional has power *over* the family (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher 2008). And increasingly in agencies such as state-sponsored universal preschools or private preschool programs, professional culture inadvertently "discourage[s] caring and relational practices" (Douglass & Gittell 2012, 271), which agency directors may perceive as unprofessional. For example, trainers, administrators, and experienced teachers may warn novice early childhood professionals not to get too close to families, as this causes professionals to be less objective. Family-centered practice, however, must reflect shared power with families and reciprocal, caring relationships (King 2009).

Appropriate use of power strategies

Social influence and social power are significant aspects of reciprocal family–professional relationships (Spino, Dinnebeil, & McInerney 2013). Erchul and colleagues (2014) note that *social influence* occurs when one person's words or actions cause another person to change in some way, and the ability to bring about change constitutes *social power*. Professionals in fields such as school psychology and educational consultation frequently address ethical issues associated with social power, and several have pointed out the need to address this topic in the early childhood field (Spino, Dinnebeil, & McInerney 2013; Erchul et al. 2014). Early childhood professionals demonstrate social power and influence through a variety of *power strategies* (Raven 2008; Spino, Dinnebeil, & McInerney 2013; Erchul et al. 2014).

Authentic servant leaders consistently display humility, integrity, security, and vulnerability.

Power strategies are natural ways of interacting with others while attempting to create changes. Strategies range from encouraging a family to develop a consistent bedtime routine to advocating that a child be evaluated for eligibility to receive early intervention services. Whether used deliberately or unintentionally, professionals employ such strategies as they use their social power to engage parents in meeting the needs of their young children (Raven 2008; Erchul et al. 2014). Such power is part of all partnerships, from collaboration with families who actively seek out support to make changes to partnerships with families who, for one reason or another, tend not to follow through on recommendations.

In order to consider the appropriate use of their influence, practitioners need to recognize that such power exists—even in collaborative relationships (Spino, Dinnebeil, & McInerney 2013). Some power strategies rely on coercion to bring about change; others rely on information or expertise. In different power strategies, different dynamics arise. For example, a professional might try to use his expertise to influence a family's decision about their child. If the family views the teacher's knowledge and skills positively, they may follow his recommendation. If the family does not respect the teacher's expertise, however, they might interpret the situation negatively and assume that the professional is using it in his own interest to establish the professional's preferred goals for the child or make work easier for the professional (Spino, Dinnebeil, & McInerney 2013). What is most relevant to this discussion is that *why* and *how* early childhood practitioners use power strategies largely determine the integrity of their collaborations with individual families and their ability to act as servant leaders.

Understanding servant leadership and family-centered practice

Although research examines many aspects of servant leadership, the authors focus on three dimensions that have particular relevance to family-centered practice: voluntary subordination, authentic self, and responsible morality (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora 2008).

Voluntary subordination

Several attributes reflect voluntary subordination. First, there is an individual's willingness to take up opportunities to serve others. Further, the service is truly voluntary rather than done out of a sense of obligation. A servant leader essentially gives up the superior status traditionally associated with leadership (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora 2008). When a preschool teacher recognizes a family as their child's first teacher and asks the family for strategies that work well at home, she demonstrates voluntary subordination. When a home visitor is flexible and lets families be the decision makers about which goals to focus on, she demonstrates voluntary subordination. Acknowledging the superior status of the family in this way lays the groundwork for trust, collaboration, and empowering the family by avoiding power struggles between professional and family.

Authentic self

Authentic self, a servant leader's secure sense of self that comes from the genuine desire to serve others, is manifested in several ways (Senjaya, Sarros, & Santora 2008). Authentic servant leaders consistently display humility, integrity, security, and vulnerability (Patterson 2003). These qualities facilitate collaboration with others as the

servant leader demonstrates that she is capable and open to suggestions and feedback. When a family raises a tricky question about toilet training and the toddler teacher says, "That's a great question! I'm not sure, but let me do some research and get back to you," he demonstrates authentic self. Similarly, when a preschool teacher acknowledges to a family, "I need your help. Tamika has been having a hard time—what do you think we could do differently?," she demonstrates the humility and vulnerability of authentic self. These leaders' reactions are not defensive, and that is essential in developing the trust and shared power that underlie family-centered practices.

Responsible morality

Responsible morality, a servant leader's commitment to ethical practice, requires sensitivity to the many ethical challenges underlying interactions between professionals and families (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora 2008). When a parent says, "You're the teacher, you decide what's best," while setting goals at a conference, and the teacher replies, "Thank you for trusting me! But I want to make sure your priorities are addressed, too," the teacher demonstrates responsible morality. Such practitioners recognize that having power *over* families is an assumption, not a necessity (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher 2008). They rely on reciprocity and caring to cultivate partnership. Flexibility that places family priorities over program needs and teacher preferences demonstrates responsible morality. One example is a preschool teacher who arranges an early drop-off time for a parent who works an overnight shift: this allows the parent to come in after she has finished her work, drop off her child, and then head home to sleep.

Adopting servant leadership practices

The following series of dialogues illustrates how interactions between the parents of a young child and an early childhood servant leader might unfold. It addresses ways a number of strategies inherent in the work of servant leaders could be carried out. The dialogues take place during an initial Individualized Family Service Plan meeting comprising a group of early childhood professionals and the parents (Roberto and Sylvia Gonzalez) of Pedro, a 27-month-old who has recently been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. The other members of the team include Patrice, Pedro's teacher; Carlos, the case coordinator; and Michelle, an early interventionist with expertise in developmental disorders.

After Roberto and Sylvia share some of Pedro's strengths and interests, Carlos reviews the evaluation results, and the team begins to discuss possible next steps for Pedro. Patrice senses Pedro's parents are unhappy with one of the options discussed—that Pedro could receive his new interventions primarily outside of class, in a clinical setting.

Give up professional power and work toward consensus decisions

Carlos: So in our clinic, Pedro could receive all the specialized interventions he qualifies for in the mornings, and then he could visit Patrice's class in the afternoon.

Roberto: You don't care about our son! You're more concerned about having more clients in your clinic and what is most convenient for the teachers!

Michelle: I see you are frustrated and are wondering whether we really want what is best for Pedro.

Roberto: That's right. I think you're acting like you are experts about Pedro and know better than us, his parents.

Patrice: I can understand why you're concerned, Roberto. You've had a lot of new information presented to you, in a meeting with people you've never met, and we've suggested that it is in Pedro's best interest that he leave the early care setting he's always known. You and Sylvia and I have grown close over the past 19 months, as we've worked together to support Pedro's development. Let's talk further about what is best for Pedro and for you, his parents.

Patrice freely relinquishes her power by not responding defensively to Roberto. A professional who views her role as that of a servant leader facilitates an open dialogue with parents and peers. Professionals can work to accomplish this in practice by reflecting on how and when they offer their expertise and ensuring that they seek the family's opinions and ideas as often as they share their own.

Exercise responsible morality by recognizing options

Carlos: Mr. Gonzalez, because we work for a state agency that provides services to young children with disabilities, we are required to follow certain guidelines. At the same time, we are very willing to discuss different options to address your family's needs. What ideas do you have for how Pedro could receive the specialized services he needs?

Carlos, the case coordinator, acknowledges that he has certain constraints, but he honors family priorities and supports alternative ideas. When servant leaders use their cultural competence to discern families' needs and preferences, they create an atmosphere conducive to more open sharing. Practitioners can create a similar atmosphere by making sure that goals and outcomes for a meeting or discussion are not predetermined without family input. Simple meeting procedures that focus on open-ended questions can help teachers implement an open dialogue and joint decision making rather than just following protocol.

Voluntarily seek out opportunities to serve others

Sylvia: Pedro has friends in Patrice's room, and we trust her ability to help Pedro learn. We want him to stay where he is because Pedro really falls apart when there is a change in routine, and then all of us are stressed out. Couldn't the specialists come here?

Patrice: Thank you for trusting me! Most of the time Pedro manages okay, but sometimes his limitations in communicating are a big challenge for me and the other children. I am very willing to continue working with Pedro, but I know I need more training and support to do it well.

Carlos: We can definitely provide training for you, Patrice. For example, using consistent visual reminders to create a personal schedule would probably help Pedro do better during transitions and when a routine changes. By working together to keep a record of Pedro's progress, we can see how well this works for him. How does that sound, Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez?

Sylvia: So much better for Pedro and for us!

Rather than hold on to her role as teacher, which would have permitted her to excuse herself from further obligation, Patrice took the opportunity to offer to serve Pedro and his parents. A servant leader's ability to act in ways that are not strictly by the book encourages families and peers to more willingly entertain nontraditional ideas, in the same way that the case coordinator followed Patrice's lead.

Display authentic qualities such as integrity, humility, and vulnerability

Carlos: Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez, I just want to say that I really appreciate your commitment to Pedro. You had a concern and you advocated for what was best for your son. I didn't mean for our suggestion to sound final, and I apologize if it did. Thank you for helping us to really focus on Pedro.

Sylvia: We just want the very best for him.

Patrice: Of course! We want that, too.

By apologizing and recognizing the Gonzalezes' strengths as advocates, Carlos demonstrates humility and integrity. Similarly, Patrice is secure enough as a servant leader to comfortably acknowledge her personal feelings (her deep affection for Pedro and his parents), her need for more professional development and support, and her willingness to try keeping Pedro in the class. When a servant leader is authentic, families often respond in kind. A servant leader's authenticity encourages families to feel more comfortable about disclosing their fears, needs, and preferences. This enhanced trust can encourage more buy-in from families and facilitate even greater levels of collaboration.

Roberto: Now I believe that we are together in figuring out what is best for Pedro and my family. I'm sorry I got frustrated earlier. Can someone teach Sylvia and me about using pictures at home with Pedro?

Michelle: I would be happy to show you and Sylvia how to use visual reminders at home. In fact, using the system at home and in preschool would provide consistency and benefit Pedro. This is a nice opportunity for us to work together on his behalf. I know that you work during the day, Roberto, so what time in the evening would be best for me to begin helping you with this?

Although no dialogue can capture all the nuances of servant leadership, our examples capture some essential aspects of the approach. The servant leadership model does not address every challenge early childhood teachers face. However, principles of servant leadership provide a solid framework to support family-centered care practices when professionals encounter increasing pressures from policy makers to achieve goals and objectives that do not align with family preferences and needs.

Conclusion

The field of early childhood has changed in response to the broader accountability movement in education. Professionals face pressures that undermine the use of family-centered early care and education practices, as policy makers expect programs to consolidate decision-making power based on traditional leadership models. There is a growing need for early childhood professionals to assume practitioner-level leadership that supports caring relationships with families based on shared power. Furthermore, there is a significant gap between the early childhood field's knowledge of the best family-centered practices and teachers having the time, resources, and abilities to carry out these practices. The servant leadership approach holds great promise for aligning early childhood leadership principles and family-centered practice in a way that ensures that shared power is cultivated rather than eroded, empowering professionals and the families they serve.

In their positions as a lead teacher in a Head Start program and an early childhood teacher educator, the authors have been working for several years to actively incorporate principles of servant leadership in their daily practices. We acknowledge that servant leadership is not easy to practice consistently. However, we also echo Sullivan's insight: servant leadership "requires that each of us determine what actions and behaviors are most likely to benefit those who are being served and that the least fortunate of those served perceives himself as better off as a result of those actions and behaviors" (2010, 14).

The dispositions associated with servant leadership are not new to early childhood; responsible morality, authentic self, and voluntary subordination have gone by various other names over several decades. One of the field's challenges, however, is to judiciously use social power and social influence strategies in a climate of accountability while not inadvertently undermining authentic parent–professional collaboration. Partnership need not be at odds with leadership—internalizing the notion of servant leadership lets early childhood professionals develop a stronger vision of what it means to pair leadership with caring in everyday family-centered practice.

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