Early Childhood Leadership: A Qualitative Study of Parent Perceptions

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Abstract

There is very little research regarding leadership development of young children, and the research that is available focuses almost exclusively on young children demonstrating leadership skills in the classroom. The understanding of young leadership can be further developed by studying children's leadership development outside the school setting. This study sought to examine the beliefs, practices, and contextual relationships of families with first graders identified as leaders. The children were initially identified as leaders by their first grade teachers who had been trained to use a validated instrument for identifying leadership skills. Four mothers and three fathers of leaders who met gender and ethnic selection criteria participated. Parental perceptions of influences on young children's leadership development were investigated via interviews and parent journals. Findings indicate that parents recognized their children's leadership skills, describing behaviors that fit well with descriptors that early childhood educators had determined and that parents were able to add to that list of descriptors based on their children's exhibit of leadership in the home and community environment. Furthermore, parents believed that their own parenting strategies, coupled with the child's inherent personality, factored into their child's leadership development.

Key words: Early Childhood, leadership, human development, gifted, parenting

1. Introduction

Human leadership development is a topic often researched during the adult years of people in organizations such as business, religion, education, and athletics. In addition, academicians recognize that leadership skills do not suddenly occur in adults, but can be seen developing in adolescents (Karnes & Bean, 1995). Although the potential leadership abilities of people ranging from adolescents through adults abound in professional literature, little focuses on young children and the emerging leadership skills they exhibit (Trawick-Smith, 1988). The early childhood years are recognized by parents, educators, and researchers as the foundational years of cognitive development. Equally important is that the early childhood environment should stimulate development in all domains—cognitive, physical, social, and emotional—and such stimulation will likely have a positive impact on overall development. In addition, skills and attitudes developed early in life are likely to be influential in overall dispositions later in life (Bloom, 1964; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Wardle, 2003). Therefore, in a world that values leadership skills, it seems only natural to be interested in the early development of those skills.

In this study, an investigation was conducted to discover factors which influence young leaders' behaviors. Parent interviews and journals were used to explore parents' perceptions about young children's emerging leadership development and the circumstances in which those leadership behaviors develop.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Early Childhood Leadership Defined

A review of research provided many definitions of leadership, but one seemed most relevant to the stage of development under discussion, the early childhood years (Foster, 1981; Kitano & Tafoya, 1983). Early childhood leadership is defined here as the process through which young children demonstrate an ability to make changes that improve the efficiency of problem solving or advance the level of thinking in a group. These changes occur from group interactions where intelligence, strong communication skills, and social/emotional aptitudes prevail (Foster, 1981; Kitano &Tafoya, 1983; Sternberg, 2005).

In the United States., leadership development fits under the Special Education "umbrella" by way of the gifted and talented education program. A monumental step toward defining leadership as a set of skills that needed to be honed in academic settings came with the first federal definition of giftedness written by U.S. Commissioner of Education, Sydney P. Marland, Jr. in 1971. The definition is as follows:

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons, who by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas singly or in combination: (a) General Intellectual Ability, (b) Specific Academic Aptitude, (c) Creative or Productive Thinking, (d) Leadership Ability, (e) Visual and Performing Arts, and (f) Psychomotor Ability (Marland, 1971, p. 8).

Because of Marland's definition, the U.S. public school system included leadership training through the gifted and talented education program. The 1971 definition has evolved since its inception over 4 decades ago; as of this writing, the current definition includes "leadership" and is grade level specific so that it includes children as young as preschoolers.

2.2 Characteristics of Young Leaders as observed in the Classroom

For this review of research, the leadership skills of 4-8-year-olds in classroom interactions are the focus. Young leaders typically enjoy social interactions and exhibit a combination of communication, intelligence, and the ability to accurately read situations and individuals.

2.2A. Linguistic competence

Topping the list as both most prevalent and important in the execution of leadership in most studies was linguistic competence, evidenced by advanced verbal skills (e.g., broad vocabulary and complex sentences), and communicating effectively with age mates and adults(Karnes & Chauvin, 2000; Kemple, Speranza & Hazen, 1992; Kitano & Tafoya, 1983; Milligan, 2004; Perez, Chassin, Ellington, & Smith, 1982; Trawick-Smith, 1988; Wolfle, 1989). Young leaders were more likely to promote continuation of play by rejecting suggestions diplomatically, usually giving a reason rather than a simple "no" (Kemple et al, 1992; Trawick-Smith, 1988; Williams & Schaller, 1990). In addition, leaders communicated effectively to enter playgroups, by observing the play, determining a role that would advance the activity, and then stepping in with a relevant suggestion (Kemple et al, 1992; Trawick-Smith, 1988). Effective communicators also responded to peers with relevant information and secured recipients' attention by saying their name, gently touching them, or making direct eye contact (Kemple et al, 1992).

2.2B. Problem-solving

Young leaders not only expressed themselves well, they also listened to their followers and made good decisions based on that input. Young leaders are curious, creative, and willing to take risks. This is evidenced by their willingness to enter into established groups (Trawick-Smith, 1988) and to offer suggestions for new play episodes and problem-solving strategies (Adcock & Segal, 1983; Hatch, 1990; Segal, Peck, Vega-Lahr & Field, 1987) as well as explore innovative methods for accomplishing a task (Sternberg, 2004).

2.2C. Intelligence

Leaders need not be gifted learners, but leaders tend to be of above average intelligence (Sternberg, 2005). This is evidenced by the ability to quickly analyze a situation, analyze possible outcomes and consequences of decisions, reach a logical conclusion, and organize a plan of action (Karnes & Chauvin, 2000; Kitano & Tafoya, 1983; Landau & Milich, 1990; Ramey, 1991; Sternberg, 2005). Above average intelligence is also apparent as exceptional leaders express creativity while enhancing the make-believe quality of play and generate innovative ideas (Feldhusen & Pleiss, 1994; Kitano & Tafoya, 1983; Sternberg, 2005; Trawick-Smith, 1988).

2.2D. Social and Emotional Skills

Positive leadership outcomes result from a give and take communication strategies including negotiation, persuasion, compromise, and taking group needs' into consideration (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2007; Sternberg, 2005; Trawick-Smith, 1988; & Wolfle, 1989). A proclivity for dealing effectually with social-emotional issues is another attribute frequently seen in young leaders, such as maintaining personal emotional control (Landau & Milich, 1990) and helping regulate and enjoying group social interactions (Segal, Peck, Vega-Lahr & Field, 1987). Socially and emotionally astute young leaders also attend to playmates' feelings, expressing empathy with actions and words (Feldhusen & Pleiss, 1994; Trawick-Smith, 1988).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3A Developmental Systems Theory.

Some believe that leadership is not learned, that people are either born with those capabilities or not. Likewise, the "great man" theory is one of many leadership theories described by Bass and Stodgill (1990), suggesting that some people are just born with a natural proclivity for leading others. Such an idea puts leadership squarely on the nature side of the long deliberated Nature vs. Nurture debate, which asks, "Is this set of behaviors more the result of genes/biology (nature) or more the result of circumstances learned in the environment (nurture)?" Whether genes or environment have a more profound effect on a person's development is not relevant when one considers the overwhelming research indicating that not only are genes and environment integrated into a complex and closely intertwined system, but the individual in question must also be considered (Anastasi, 1958; Gottlieb, Wahlsten, & Lickliter, 1998). Humans do not passively wait for the environment to act on them, but instead people actively engage with their surroundings to actively shape their world, thus contributing to their own development (Lerner, 2002). This view of human development is a theoretical orientation of human development which falls under the *developmental systems theory* (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Gottlieb et al., 1998; Overton, 1998; Sameroff, 1983; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

2.3B. Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development

Urie Bronfenbrenner's view of development as change that occurs resulting from bidirectional relations between active individuals and their active context over time is an example of a developmental systems theory and provides a logical theoretical lens through which to explore the relationships between the developing individual and the variables associated with that individual's multi-layered contexts. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development (1979) asserts that humans develop within and are influenced by interactions in various contextual levels. The first level is the *microsystem*, which is the immediate context containing the developing person, and consequently his or her biology, along with the relations between that developing person and the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An example of this is a child living in a home where he has relationships with family members. The second level, the *mesosystem,* is the interrelationship between the contexts the child exists within, such as home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The third level is the *exosystem,* wherein the child has little or no contact with the people in this level but is influenced by events that occur within it, such as decisions made at a parent's workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A fourth level is the *macrosystem,* the overarching level of society the child exists within, including social, cultural, political, and historical influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Lerner, 2002). This theory also incorporates time as a functioning variable, the *chronosystem* Bronfenbrenner, 1995). An example of time as an influential factor is the child's age when a significant crisis occurs. Each level of the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development is connected to another. Changes, events, and disturbances at one level impact other levels (Lerner, 2002). Specifically for this study, childhood leadership development was examined by looking at the child in his immediate environment and within the interactions of the larger environment by using the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development as a guide.

3. Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate influences on young children's leadership skills enacted outside the school context. With this in mind, the researcher hypothesized that young children's leadership development can be expanded upon by studying parents' perceptions of their child's leadership development as it is exhibited in the home and other contexts.

3.1 Setting and Participants

A brief description of the area where the research took place is presented below. The interviews took place in 2013, and the demographics reported here are for the year 2013.

Big River County (pseudonym) is located in the southern region of the U.S. At the time of the study, it was one of the poorest southern states (Yahoo Finance, 2018), with about 20% of inhabitants living below the poverty line. The median household income was approximately $30,000, as compared to greater median household incomes represented by the state and nation at approximately $45,000 and $53,000, respectively (U. S. Census Bureau, 2013a). Demographic data for the county reflected that 54% were Caucasian, 41% African American, 2% Creole, 2% Hispanic, and 1% Native American. As might be expected of a county where a state college is located, the educational attainment levels were relatively high in comparison to the rest of the state and the nation. Those having a high school degree or GED were about 33%, and those having a college degree made up an additional 21%, compared to a national average of 30% with high school degrees or GEDs and 14.4% with bachelor degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b).

Big River Magnet School (pseudonym) was created in 2006 and within a decade established a reputation for challenging students to excel in academics. With limited enrollment (only two classes per grade level), it served 320 students from first to eighth grade. To apply, students had to have and maintain a 2.5 or better GPA, acceptable behavior, a good attendance record, and score "Basic" or above on the state mandated test or 50% or higher on other standardized tests. The school reflected the ethnic makeup of the county with approximately 149 Caucasian, 152 African American, 9 Creole, 4 Asian, and 2 American Indian students.

First graders were preferred for this study because the school did not have a kindergarten. All the first graders at the magnet school had experienced a year in a formal education setting, but the first graders were not likely to have prior developed relationships with their classmates while attending kindergarten, thus eliminating many presupposed relationships or reputations. Like the school in general, the first grade also reflected the ethnic population of the community with 19 Caucasian students, 20 African American students, and 1 Asian student.

Children attending Big River Magnet School were identified as young leaders by having 1st grade teachers administer the Leadership portion of the *Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students-III (SRBCSS-III)* (Renzulli, Smith, White, Callahan, Hartman, Westburg, Gavin, Reis, Siegle, & Reed, 2010). Results were given to the researcher using only numbers for identification. High scores were determined and sorted by gender and ethnicity. Ethnicities represented in the study were African-American and Caucasian, by far the most represented ethnic groups of both the school and local community. The principal identified the names of whom the highest scores belonged and provided parent contact information.

Mothers of the highest scorers in each gender and ethnicity category agreed to be interviewed and then were prompted to ask the child's father if he would agree to be interviewed as well. Both parents of each of the highest scorers agreed to participate, with the exception of one father. This resulted in interviews with the parent(s) of four children: (a) Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer, parents of Justin, Caucasian male; (b) Ms. Bigsby, parent of Brad, African American male; (c) Dr. and Mrs. Pillsbury, parents of Brianna, Caucasian female; and (d) Mr. and Mrs. Flowers, parents of Talia, African American female (all pseudonyms).

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

3.2A. Measures

In addition to the initial data collected at the school used to identify young leaders, data also included parent interviews, parent journals, member-checking of transcripts, within-case analysis, and cross-case analysis. Each of these is clarified below.

During the interview process, the central question that steered this study was: *Are there certain practices, beliefs, or contextual relationships within the family of a young child who has been identified as a leader in the academic setting that will contribute to an in-depth understanding of how parenting performance influences the development of a young leader?* In order to understand the beliefs, practices, and contextual influences of four families, one-on-one interviews were conducted. Sometimes parents think of information they wish they had shared with an interviewer only after the interview has concluded and the parent has had additional time to ponder the questions more intensely (Unpublished manuscript, Hailey, 2008). With that in mind, three separate 45-minute interviews were planned to allow mothers additional processing time to potentially give the interviews greater depth. However, fathers opted to engage in only one in-depth interview, lasting from 1-2 hours. The parent interview questions were designed to elucidate both the central question and these three sub-questions.

1. How do parents conceptualize leadership?
2. How do parents believe their own parenting skills contribute to or support their child's leadership development?
3. What contextual factors do parents perceive as being supportive of early childhood leadership skill development?

Participants were also asked to journal their perspectives on parenting young leaders. For each entry, parents described a specific situation relating to a childhood leadership question in order to create personal stories. First, parents were asked to describe a personal experience when they believed their concept of leadership was shaped or influenced. They were encouraged to write in a story form by beginning their entry with "I remember one time when…" Second, parents were asked to describe a situation when they saw a difference in the availability of opportunities for leadership development by answering, "How do you think your child's opportunities for developing leadership skills are different from the opportunities you had at his/her age? Describe a specific situation or experience when you saw this happening." Journals were retrieved one week after the last interview.

3.2B. Procedures

Each parent was given a consent form which explained the study. Then, one-on-one interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient for the parents (e.g., coffee shops and homes). Interviews were recorded, and the timespan between the first and last interview was 83 days. By transcribing, reading, and rereading interviews, patterns and themes emerged that further guided or rerouted the research.

Mothers chose to participate in three 45-minute interviews, while fathers chose to participate in one in-depth interview that lasted 1-2 hours. Mothers chose to read over their typed transcripts, but fathers did not. Thus, several methods of data collection were employed: three rounds of one-on-one structured and unstructured interviews (for mothers), one in-depth interview (for fathers), content analysis of parent journals (mothers and fathers), transcript checking of reports (mothers), within-case analysis, and cross-case analysis (mothers and fathers). All of the mothers took the opportunity to read, correct, and make comments on transcribed interviews, but no changes were requested.

3.2C. Analysis

Immersion in the data to identify patterns and themes was used both as an organizational strategy and technique to guide data analysis. Data obtained in the interviews were initially organized into categories of beliefs, practices, context factors, limitations, and supports with subsets determined and labeled as patterns emerged and categories evolved.

During the within-case analysis of each family, data were coded separately, considering each family as a bound system. Although each interview session was organized around particular topics and, not surprisingly, was influenced by the initial topics of interest and themes of categorization, there was a continuous search for emerging, unexpected themes and collections of instances that could be grouped together because they had a similar meaning for the participant(s). As themes emerged, clusters of ideas were gathered on visual displays, including quotes and details supporting the themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to create a profile of each family. After analyzing the themes that emerged from family profiles, the researcher explored salient issues and themes which connected the families' perspectives in a cross-case analysis. A search ensued for repetition of an aspect of experience and connections to the literature review as beginning points of comparisons between cases. When data gathered from families were compared to one another, new themes, topics, and issue-relevant meanings emerged.

By reading and rereading interview transcripts, closely examining journals, cross-checking reports, and seeking out evidence that might conflict with initial findings, patterns both within families and across families emerged.

3.2D. Trustworthiness and reliability

In order for qualitative research to be deemed valid, it must show evidence of trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to a research report (Creswell, 2007). Seidman (1991) argued that a series of three in-depth interviews over the course of weeks in and of itself contains substantial indicators of trustworthiness. However, other strategies were employed to increase validity and credibility (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995). Triangulation methods of oral interviews and personal journals along with participant transcript checking were used to provide a greater understanding of the beliefs, context factors, and practices of parents whose first grade child was identified as a leader by a teacher. Further, each family was considered as a bound case, and then commonalities and differences between families acted as guiding forces behind a cross-case analysis between families. Utilizing both within- and cross-case analysis added additional robustness and trustworthiness to the study.

4. Results

Many common themes emerged as the data were analyzed. The topics addressed here primarily attributes of children and parents. While child attributes will be discussed, parent attributes (e.g., demographic patterns, roles, and parenting practices) will be the focus.

4.1 Children

4.1A. Child leader characteristics

Initial child leader characteristics derived from a research review resulted in 10 categories of young leadership typically seen in the classroom. The resulting categories were: shows awareness of differences in people, has influence on others, regulates emotions, is socially active, expresses creativity, is highly organized, displays physical competence, displays self-confidence, exhibits linguistic competence, and listens to peers. All 10 of those categories were recognized by parents in this study as they observed their children in a variety of settings. Interestingly, 4 new categories of young leadership enactment outside the classroom setting were added: determination, morality, love of learning, and non-biased attitude. Table 1 lists these child leader characteristics along with ways parents described those characteristics exhibited by their children.

Characteristic	Examples given by parents	Characteristic	Examples given by parents
Table 1. Characteristics Exhibited in Home and Community by Very Young Leaders According to Parent Descriptions			
Characteristic	Examples given by parents	Characteristic	Examples given by parents
Determination	▪ Makes a decision and follows through ▪ Works on skills until satisfied ▪ Has strong will power ▪ Is independent ▪ Stands his/her ground ▪ Is stubborn ▪ Is persistent ▪ Sticks with topic for long time ▪ Has strong work ethic	Is highly organized	▪ Plans ahead ▪ Thinks through things before making a decision ▪ Thinks of many ways to accomplish a goal ▪ Makes checklists ▪ Gets necessary materials together for projects ▪ Assesses everyone's needs and follows through
Morality	▪ Stands up for beliefs ▪ Has strong moral compass ▪ Tells others how to follow rules ▪ Exhibits good character ▪ Has strong sense of fairness ▪ Studies Bible alone and with family	Regulates emotions	▪ Enthusiastic ▪ Has a generally positive attitude ▪ Not a hitter ▪ Shows self-control ▪ Is even tempered ▪ Is patient
Love of learning	▪ Is smart ▪ Is good student ▪ Loves to learn new things/explore ▪ Asks lots of questions ▪ Loves to read/learned to read early	Listens to peers	▪ Listens and learns from siblings ▪ Listens to determine others' needs ▪ Is willing to accept others' ideas ▪ Sees the perspectives of others ▪ Negotiates
Non-biased attitude	▪ Doesn't notice skin color ▪ Doesn't judge others ▪ Doesn't assign class to people	Expresses Creativity	▪ Shows dramatic flair ▪ Thinks of many ways to accomplish a goal ▪ Is a creative problem-solver
Shows awareness of differences in people	▪ Is aware of others' emotional needs ▪ Shares limelight ▪ Has role models that are looked up to ▪ Recognizes others' strengths and weaknesses ▪ Individualizes communication per age of child ▪ Plays different roles with different children ▪ Is protective of younger children	Displays self-confidence	▪ Speaks comfortably to audience ▪ Takes initiative ▪ Is decisive ▪ Is very flexible/adaptable ▪ Makes own decisions ▪ Sticks up for self/brave ▪ Is very confident ▪ Makes own decisions ▪ Is independent thinker
Influences others' behavior	▪ Encourages others toward goal ▪ Is admired/respected by peers ▪ Is persuasive ▪ Teaches others ▪ Influences others through modeling ▪ Influences others through verbal skills ▪ Argues well ▪ Expresses opinion to sway others	Exhibits linguistic competence	▪ Began talking early ▪ Has good communication skills ▪ Chooses words carefully ▪ Is diplomatic in addressing issues ▪ Is very verbal ▪ Makes wishes/needs known ▪ Speaks comfortably in public ▪ Uses correct English ▪ Corrects other peoples' grammar
Is socially active	▪ Gets along well with others ▪ Likes to get involved ▪ Is not shy	Displays physical competence	▪ Is physically energetic ▪ Displays athletic coordination ▪ Enjoys outdoor activities

4.1B. Child leader practices

All the children had the broad child leader practices of building relationships, achieving in school, being socially active, applying learning to new situations, being leaders in different contexts, usually meeting behavioral expectations, and being involved in community activities.

Broadly speaking, the overall practices of the children were very similar. More specifically, some children engaged in one or another of the practices with greater frequency or with more passion than another, but the practices were enacted enough and relevant enough that parents spoke about the practice as part of their conversations about their child's lifeways. For instance, some of the children spent more time involved in community activities like being involved with sports teams. Others spent more time in community activities like helping others. Some were inclined to spread their time between many different activities, while others had only one or two ways of getting involved in the community. Taken individually, they each have particular strengths, different ways of influencing group processes and expressing their leadership abilities, but as a group, their general practices fall into these 7 categories.

Child leader behaviors were observed by parents in a number of settings including home, school-related activities, church, extracurricular settings, free play with friends, sports activities, etc. The parents intentionally support participation in many different social situations, anticipating that the child will learn expectations for different settings. More particularly, parents have a variety of roles that they play in helping to develop their child's leadership skills and those roles were defined by the parenting practices that they used. Parent demographic patterns, roles, and practices will be the focus for the remainder of this article.

4.2 Parents

4.2A. Parent demographic patterns

Some parent features in each family were similar enough to be remarkable. Middle socioeconomic status remained constant, and every family had at least one parent with a college education. Three of the families had one long-term marriage; one parent was divorced. Regardless of marital status, each parent reported a significant other as a parenting partner. Each of the married couples made comments to suggest they considered parenting to be a partnership and leaned on one another for help in making child-rearing decisions. Despite the single mother's continued parenting relationship with the child's father, her mother, who lives next door, is vital in helping with day-to-day child guidance. All the parents were in their thirties when the young leaders were born. Table 2 outlines the demographic patterns of the young leaders' parents.

Table 2. Demographic Patterns of Young Leaders' Parents							
Parents	Middle income level	B.A. or B.S. degree	Masters, Doctoral, or Professional degree	Married	Divorced or Single Parent	Parenting Partner present	30-40-years-old at time of young leader's birth
Mr.Sawyer	X	X		X		X	X
Mrs.Sawyer	X	X		X		X	X
Ms. Bigsby	X	X			X	X	X
Dr. Pillsbury	X	X	X	X		X	X
Mrs.Pillsbury	X	X	X	X		X	X
Mr. Flowers	X	X		X		X	X
Mrs. Flowers	X			X		X	X

4.2B. Parent roles and practices

Four mothers and three fathers participated in this study. All of these parents described themselves in ways that were classified as counselor, teacher, supporter, values keeper, and encourager. Four other categories were developed based on parent perceptions—organizer, family historian, tour guide of life, and protector—but only some of the parents saw themselves in these roles, as explained in the sections which follow.

4.2B1. Counselor

Every parent interviewed described parenting practices that showed two-way communication in the parent-child relationship as well as conversations that centered on helping a child make a decision, and those instances were categorized as counselor. In discussing ways that she has influenced Brad's leadership skill development, Ms. Bigsby said,

When he makes bad decisions, I will ask him, "What could you have done differently?" or "What could have made for a better outcome?" So I set up situations where he has to actually think about it and explain to me why it is what it is like, "Brad, what do you think your punishment should be for this particular offense?" We talk through a lot of things.

Mrs. Sawyer discussed counseling her son to promote independence. She said, "I tried to do that with my own kids from a young age—just get them thinking…Well, is it better to just impulsively do this or is it better to think about it and do it in the right kind of steps?"

4.2B2. Teacher

The teacher role was designated for episodes where parents specifically said they taught their child a skill set or modeled a skill. For instance, Mrs. Flowers said she made every effort to teach her children academic skills, how to clean and dress themselves to be presentable in public, and correct grammar and word usage.

Parents often mentioned modeling as a way of teaching their children. In conversing with Mrs. Pillsbury about public speaking in church, she said,

Certainly she sees us and knows that public speaking and those kinds of things will be what is expected of her someday, so I would think that she looks to us and other leaders in the church as role models.

One particular set of skills, "critical thinking" skills, was mentioned by several parents. Two of the parents who used that term were teachers, so that is rather predictable, but Mr. Flowers used that same term as well. Critical thinking skills, decision-making skills/opportunities, and problem solving skills are closely aligned and were well represented among parent responses as ways that they helped their child develop leadership skills. Researchers hypothesize that these are common skills taught in upper and middle income families in the U.S. and serve to perpetuate upper and middle income levels. Children who are critical thinkers generally grow up to be creative problem solvers who are self-motivated to be independent, self-directed life-long learners. These skills and attitudes translate into higher-paying, more highly respected self-regulating professional and leadership positions—typically middle and upper income level jobs. Conversely, lower income families tend to dwell on obedience and conformity, values which increase success in jobs requiring close supervision, low self-regulation, and minimal independence, translating into historically low paying, low respect blue collar and unskilled labor positions, thus sustaining a cycle of multigenerational poverty (Hoff et al., 2002).

4.2B3. Supporter

The supporter role was used when parents indicated provision of goods or services that allowed their child to take advantage of an opportunity. Both the Pillsburys and Sawyers have several active children who participate in a wide variety of sports and other activities. By saying that they "never miss a game" or always make sure transportation is provided to Boy Scouts, they are indicating their support. In the Flowers family, the mother is the leader in providing academic reinforcement at home and makes every effort to provide a home environment that is conducive to learning—specific spaces and materials are provided at every stage of development. Another example from the Flowers family is the supportive role that the father plays in providing opportunities for Talia to have social interactions outside of the family.

4.2B4.Values keeper

The role of values keeper was categorized more by content than process. Many of these values were also taught or resulted from counseling, but, because values, virtues, principles, and morals stood out as the content to be achieved, these were placed in a separate category. Mr. Sawyer values fairness, discussing it in relation to games, gender equality, and opportunities for school options that children may or may not have.

Several parents mentioned the teachings they want their child to get from the church experience and the home culture that strengthens those values. In addition, many of them talked about valuing education. Mrs. Pillsbury values education, but said that it is so deeply ingrained that she wouldn't have thought to mention it.

Researcher: *So the story you told me earlier about expecting the kids to get their homework done and Brianna not realizing that every family doesn't do that. You would say that illustrates…what?*
Mrs. Pillsbury: *…that I value education, but I wouldn't have thought to actually mention it….I don't always know what other families do, so I am not necessarily aware of how what we do is different. I mean, isn't it just normal to value education?*

4.2B5. Encourager

Parents encourage their children by giving them confidence in their abilities and advancing their development. When parents used the word "encourage" or their description implied a cheerleader kind of role rather than teaching specific skills, the role was coded as encourager. Referring to the role discussed in the preceding paragraph of Mr. Flowers supporting his daughter by providing opportunities for Talia to have many social interactions, Mrs. Flowers' complementary role is as an encourager because she doesn't teach the skills, but paves a path for allowing more social interaction outside of the family to occur. The parents play complementary roles to one another in this aspect because the mother is "the quiet one" and the father is the "talkative type." Sometimes encouraging children can be as much about what a parent doesn't do as it is about what they do. For example, Dr. Pillsbury said that when he was growing up, his parents "picked" on their kids about singing in "front of groups, having boyfriends or girlfriends and things like that." As a parent, he doesn't say anything negative to his children about such situations, but "just lets it happen" and believes that by having a more encouraging attitude his daughter is "comfortable singing or doing things" that he wouldn't have been comfortable doing at her age. Mr. Sawyer believes that he encourages risk-taking within reason because in life, sports, or engineering, adults and children need to "have those failures" that come from going beyond a comfort zone. He talked about going back and forth with his youth soccer team to play the big city teams and how badly the team lost.

Got back. Practiced. Went down. Beatings weren't so bad. Then it got to where we were beating them or at least the games were even. They're getting better and that comes from losing. It comes from failure. Failure is fine. You know, I tell engineers 'If you never have a project that is a failure, then you are not doing your job. You are not taking enough risks. You are not looking at enough alternatives. You are not doing enough testing. All you are doing is taking the safe, easy route every time.'

Table 3 shows how different parents in this study fulfill the role of *Encourager*.

Table 3. Encourager- Parents encourage their children by giving them confidence in their abilities and advancing or furthering some aspect of their development.	
Parent	Ways the *Encourager* role was enacted
Mr. Sawyer	Encourages trying new activities Encourages independence Encourages self-reliance Encourages risk taking within reason Challenges child to improve skills
Mrs. Sawyer	Encourages independent thinking
Ms. Bigsby	Encourages good decision-making Nurtures his abilities in different endeavors
Dr. Pillsbury	Encourages academic achievement Encourages participation in extracurricular activities Spends quality time with children Makes concerted effort not to "pick" on kids about normal childhood activities such as having a boyfriend or singing in front of a group
Mrs. Pillsbury	Encourages freedom of expression Encourages child to achieve goals
Mr. Flowers	Helps child to be motivated and have positive attitude Points out and expresses approval of caring attitude Encourages preparing for the future
Mrs. Flowers	Encourages daughter in being more outgoing

4.2B6. Organizer

One role seemed to be primarily reserved for mothers, the role of organizer. The organizer of the family communicates with others regarding arrangements, as well as manages family time and resources. Mothers indicated frequently that they relied heavily on the "mommy network" for sending and receiving e-mails and texts to stay abreast of their child's responsibilities for different events. Occasionally, fathers gave some indication of being an organizer, but other context clues indicated that the mother was the primary person responsible for that job. Here's an example: Dr. Pillsbury indicated that he and his wife researched Big River County school options prior to moving from another city.

His purpose was in helping to determine whether the children could receive a quality education in this community or not; an indication that he values a quality education and supports his children in their desires to go to a good school. It was his wife who communicated with the school about details, made arrangements for transportation, and completed the paperwork, so she was categorized as the organizer and he was not. Mr. Flowers, on the other hand, clearly thinks about organizational strategies and teaches the responsibilities of running an efficient household to his children. For example, Mr. Flowers "does not like being late" and has taught Talia skills for organizing backpacks, shoes, clothing, and lunch boxes the night before a school day so that getting out of the house on time is a smooth transition. However, Mrs. Flowers is the one who "always takes the children to school" and makes sure that they get there on time, indicating that she is also a time manager in the family.

Three other roles were mentioned as roles that parents perceived as being important and helping to build a foundation for leadership development. Mrs. Pillsbury talked about her role as family historian and Ms. Bigsby saw herself as both a tour guide of life and a protector.

4.2B7. Family historian

The family historian shares family stories with the intention of teaching a lesson. Mrs. Pillsbury said that carrying on a family legacy involves teaching children about their family history and that "there are certain things" that your family is "known for and that the children should carry on those traditions." A great story Mrs. Pillsbury told involves both family history and church history. Both Dr. and Mrs. Pillsbury's families have been members of the Mormon Church for many, many generations. The Mormon Church holds high regard for the teaching of church history, spending 1 year out of every 4-year cycle concentrating on the teaching of church history. Mrs. Pillsbury described the early American Mormons:

[They] are held up as people who suffered persecution, who stood up for what they believed and went out West to escape that persecution and then established communities out there that then allowed everything to thrive. So they are revered in our history for being able to withstand the things that they endured.

One of the stories the Pillsbury children are told by their mother is about a grandmother from many generations back in time. Back then there were "mobs that would form against Mormons" because their ideologies were not understood or well received by many. She continued, "And this mob had formed" around the grandmother's house. "She had missionaries staying at her house. They were young men who were going around to teach people." The mob had gathered "outside of her house demanding that those missionaries be brought out because they wanted to do something to them." The mobs had "attacked" other missionary groups and that information had spread, so that the grandmother was well aware of the mob's intentions. The grandmother, who was also a long-time resident of the community and practiced midwifery, stood on her front porch with shotgun in hand and "hollered, 'I brought every one of you into this world and I can take every one of you out right now!'" So she "stood up for the missionaries and the mob disbanded." This story is used to illustrate that their family has a long history of standing up for what they believe is right even if it goes against popular opinion and to teach that when one is known to have a respectable reputation, his words carry more weight.

Research indicated that women are frequently the transmitter of family histories and oral storytelling is a mode for passing lessons and values to the next generation, as well as a way to help children establish a positive identity (Thompson et al., 2009). In her popular press book, Stone (1988) said that

[Our family stories] delineate the rules and the mores that govern family life, rules that succor and support as well as rules that chafe uncomfortably; rules that are out in the open as well as those that operate only by stealth. Indeed, family stories go a step further and define the family, saying not only what members should do, but who they are or should be (p. 31).

4.2B8. Tour guide of life

Ms. Bigsby had two roles she perceived herself as filling that were distinctive to her in this study. The first was the role of tour guide of life, defined in this study by statements made by the parent indicating she shed light on what happened to other people, and used that information as an opportunity to teach her child an important life skill or behavioral expectation.

Ms. Bigsby said,

I will explain situations when we see things together. I am like "that is not how you would treat your little brother" or whatever. "If I see you doing that, there is going to be a price to pay." So a lot of it is upbringing….Even when he is not with me, you know, I want him to have some character…You know, that means doing the right thing when no one else is looking. Mom is not watching, even then, you do the right thing.

In some ways Ms. Bigsby's role as tour guide of life is closely akin to Mrs. Pillsbury's role as family historian. They both use the circumstances that happened to other people to teach life skills, lessons, and values. Three main differences stand out. First, Mrs. Pillsbury specifically used family members' stories as opposed to Ms. Bigsby's community stories. Second, Mrs. Pillsbury used historical stories as compared to Ms. Bigsby's current in-the-moment stories. Last, Mrs. Pillsbury only used positive stories whereas Ms. Bigsby used negative stories to teach that she wanted to see different behaviors from her son. The parallels between these parent roles illustrate ways that parents convey similar messages but use different strategies to do so.

4.2B9. Protector

The second role played by Ms. Bigsby is that of protector. The protector role was defined for this study as statements indicating that the parent perceived her role as guarding her children or shielding them from harm. Three of the activities Ms. Bigsby talked about in this category were (a) constantly watching out of the window when her son is playing with neighborhood kids, (b) limiting his activities to those that either she can supervise or another trustworthy adult can supervise, and (c) maintaining his childhood innocence. It is certainly possible that other parents protect their children in different ways as well, but that this role is more substantial in her mind is interesting for a number of reasons. One, she is a single mother who may feel more pressure to fulfill this role than she would if there were another young, strong adult in the home to share the role. Second, she works with prisoners and is more aware of the harm humans can inflict. Lastly, she lives near a low-income housing complex and communicated several times that she had low expectations for the parents and children in her neighborhood to follow the same rules she expected in her family; therefore, there may be some concerns about neighborhood safety.

4.3 Bioecological Systems Perspective

By examining parent transcripts through the "lens" of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development (1979; 1995; 1999), the direct and indirect influences of different contexts noted by parents as opportunities for leadership development and the interconnectedness of the different levels are readily apparent.

Parents in this study believed that early childhood leadership was strongly impacted by interactions with humans in the family and in the community, or the **microsystem**. Considering the ways parents saw their children enacting leadership as outlined in Table 1, it is evident that children have intrapersonal skills such as determination, expressing creativity, and self-regulation of emotions. In addition, they exhibit interpersonal skills such as awareness of differences in people, influencing others' behaviors, being socially active, and exhibiting linguistic competence. In order to exhibit interpersonal skills, child leaders must interact with others, thus there are microsystemic interactions as the child has face-to-face communications with others. Moreover, the parents gave examples of the children encouraging peers in sports or in a school play, practicing public speaking skills at school and church, and showing morality and character development in neighborhood interactions, school, and home. Thus, the peers that the child interacts with in these different contexts as well as the adults who are present and provide the opportunities for these interactions are influential in the child's leadership development.

Connections between home and community activities such as church, sporting events, and the child's school are well-represented in the **mesosystem** by the families interviewed. As the parental role of organizer indicated, parents communicated with other adults to determine times, travel arrangements, materials, and other details to ensure their child was prepared for activities. Parents identified various types of communication that helped them in this role, including notes sent home, school activities that included parents, mobile phone conversations, e-mails, and texts.

The **exosystem** is a part of society that the developing leader has no direct contact with; however, the events that occur within it are influential to his development. Family legacy, church history, parent workplace, internet access, and neighborhood were all cited by parents as having some kind of influence on leadership development, yet the

regulations, expectations, or influences of each of the aforementioned aspects of the exosystem indirectly impacted their young leaders.

According to the parents, the overarching levels of society the child exists within are influential in early childhood leadership with values, culture, and economics given specific consideration; thus, **macrosystemic** influences are recognized. Values included a quality education, a strong work ethic, a sense of morality and character, the importance of making good decisions, and a sense of history about family and church. Culture came into play as parents shared their perceptions of gender role expectations and an understanding of school culture. Information about reading notes in backpacks, getting to school on time, doing homework, and providing space for studying/reading were all indicators of valuing education and understanding the expectations of a school culture. In addition, culture/history played a role as children learned about morality and expected behaviors through intergenerational stories at church and about family or stories about people in the immediate environment. Economic influences on leadership were also evident as parents discussed their roles as supporters who provided the funding, transportation, and human capital that make participation in extracurricular activities possible.

Lastly, the **chronosystem** effects every level of the system, but its influence is particularly evident as time effected culture and living situations. More explicitly, time allowed for technological advances that led to extensive ownership and use of home computers and mobile phones, making quick communication more accessible. In addition, the need for such quick and easy communication may be seen as more needed in a day and time when all of the parents worked outside the home. As such, their children have different life experiences than earlier generations when mothers were more likely to be homemakers. Overarching cultural change such as more parents working outside the home is just one example of cultural changes over time having an effect on life experiences and learning opportunities. A core concept outlined in the book *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) is that "culture influences every aspect of human development and is reflected in childrearing beliefs and practices designed to promote healthy adaptation" (p. 4).

4.4 Summary of Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development

The human relationships and interactions a child experiences influences her early leadership development. The closer the relationships and the more frequent the interactions, the more influential each becomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Because every individual exists within a family, which exists within a community and society, none of the contextual levels can be considered separate bodies; all are connected and influence one another. An individual develops within the child-parent relationship that, in turn, is embedded within day-to-day interactions with others. The family shapes and is shaped by the quality of the relationships it has outside the family and within the community, and the society and history that the family is embedded within indirectly influences the world where an individual lives and develops (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

5. Conclusion

This study had a small number of participants who resided in a small geographical area at a particular point in time. However, by limiting the sample to children who initially exhibited leadership in the academic setting, leadership and academic achievement may have been confounded. To enhance the possibility that this study may be informative to other contexts of similar makeup, a rich description of families' practices was provided along with ties to the literature review.

This study could be contrasted with a similar study that identifies young leaders through extracurricular activities rather than the school context, thus limiting the likelihood of confusing leadership with other constructs such as academic achievement. Parents in this study felt they had parented their children in similar ways, yet some of their children had greater leadership skills than others. Looking at family structures such as size of family, birth order, and parent age at time of child's birth could shed light on why similar parenting practices influence children in the same family in different ways.

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