From Acquired Knowledge to Leading Change: Evaluating the Impact of a Pedagogical Leadership Academy for Early Childhood Administrators

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood care and education (ECEC) program administrators play a pivotal role in shaping both the quality and sustainability of the programs they lead. They serve as the linchpin for multiple organizational functions that directly influence staff satisfaction and retention. Their responsibilities span staff hiring and onboarding, supervision and professional growth, fiscal management, and cultivating a mission-driven organizational climate (Bloom & Abel, 2015; Douglass, 2018; Douglas & Kirby, 2022; Kelton & Talan, 2023; Kelton et al., 2026; Talan et al., 2014).

Within this context, empowered administrators who demonstrate strong pedagogical leadership, one of three domains of leadership as defined by the Whole Leadership Framework (McCormick Institute for Early Childhood, 2026), along with administrative leadership and leadership essentials, are essential to empowering teachers. The Whole Leadership Framework defines pedagogical leadership as "facilitating a community of learning that builds on the strengths of children, families, and staff. Pedagogical Leadership includes ensuring fidelity to research-based curricula, assessing children's development and learning, using data for evaluation, optimizing learning environments, and empowering families" (McCormick Institute for Early Childhood, 2026). They influence what happens in the classroom not only through administrative oversight but also by cultivating an organizational climate that enables teachers to maximize learning opportunities for children, engage families and communities, and continuously refine their own practice (Pacchiano et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2019; Talan et al., 2014).

The field of ECEC continues to document a pressing need for leadership development that equips administrators with the reflective, relational, and adaptive capacities required for effective pedagogical leadership, as well as the systems and structures that sustain teacher leadership (e.g., Kelton & Tenis, 2024; Kelton et al., 2026; Kirby et al., 2020). Similarly, many teacher leaders require additional support to build the confidence, knowledge, and skills necessary to enact pedagogical leadership among their peers (Kirby et al., 2020). In response to these challenges, the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University, in partnership with Early Learning Indiana, developed the Building Impact Leadership Academy.

The 2-year Building Impact Academy was created for leaders in early learning programs throughout Indiana to help build their identity as strong instructional leaders by optimizing classroom practices through coaching and cultivating curiosity (Early Learning Indiana, 2026). Two cohorts have completed year 1 of the program, with the McCormick Institute and Early Learning Indiana as facilitators during this time period, which was designed to strengthen the pedagogical leadership practices of early childhood program administrators and

teacher leaders. While this analysis focuses on year 1, Building Impact instructional leaders continue to dedicate time to their professional growth in year 2, facilitated by Early Learning Indiana.

BUILDING IMPACT

Building Impact's curriculum content was built on the foundational premise that ***empowered administrators empower teachers***. Across ten monthly professional learning sessions during the first year of implementation, participants worked toward achieving four key goals: 1) enhancing pedagogical leadership, 2) developing and implementing reflective coaching practices, 3) fostering a culture of distributed leadership and continuous quality improvement (CQI), and 4) applying data-informed decision-making to support teacher and program improvement. This mixed-methods study evaluated the effectiveness of Building Impact's first two cohorts in achieving those goals.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROGRAMS

For this evaluation, data were used only from participants who had completed the academy, defined as those who attended at least 75% of the sessions. Forty-nine participants met this criterion. Because survey participation was voluntary, some participants opted not to complete all instruments or individual items, resulting in varying sample sizes (range: 11 – 49). Missing data also prevents statistical comparisons between those who completed the academy and those who did not.

At the start of the academy, 43 of the 49 participants provided demographic information. The majority identified themselves as directors or assistant directors (see Table 1 for a breakdown). Most respondents identified as female (95%), with one identifying as male and one as non-binary. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 69 years, with the largest groups aged 40 – 49 (37%) and 30 – 39 (28%). The majority of participants (78%) reported their race as White or Caucasian, 14% as Black or African American, 7% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 2% as multiracial.

Table 1.
Participant Role

Role	Number of participants	Percentage
Executive Director/Director	28	65%
Assistant Director	5	12%
Coordinator/Coach	3	7%
Supervisor	2	5%
Other	5	12%

Note. N =43

All but six participants had previous experience teaching young children. Educational attainment among participants was varied; 37 (81%) held a college degree. Among those, 21% held an Associate's degree, 35% a Bachelor's degree, and 30% held an advanced degree. Nearly all participants (95%) had completed at least

some college coursework in ECE, and 67% of those with degrees (*N* = 37) had majored in ECE or child development. Ten participants (23%) held an early childhood license or certification, and 12 (28%) held an elementary teaching license or certification. Only one participant possessed a state or national administrator/director credential. These data suggest that although most participants were well educated and experienced in ECE, few held administrative credentials, underscoring the ongoing need for specialized leadership training in the field.

Table 2.
Participants' Relevant Years of Experience

Years of experience	*M(SD)*	Mode(s)	Range
In the field	20(9.88)	10, 15, 23	2-47
In an administrative position	7(6.51)	5	0-36
In current position	3(3.23)	2	0-15

Note. N = 43.

Participants had considerably more years of experience in the ECE field than in their current or other administrative positions (see Table 2). Participants were also asked to provide information about the centers they served. Across all participating programs, administrators collectively served 1,181 children. Individual program enrollment ranged from 25 to 166 (*M* = 79). Each program served a wide age range: 74% served infants (birth to 11 months), 84% served toddlers (12 to 30 months), 100% served preschoolers (31 months to 5 years), and 24% served school-age children (5 to 12 years old). Together, the programs served 1,424 children who received subsidized care through the Federal Child Care Assistance Program. Thirty programs (70%) received Pre-K funding, and eight (20%) received Head Start or Early Head Start funding.

METHODOLOGY

Measures

An Intake Survey was administered prior to the start of the academy to collect baseline information about participants, including their backgrounds, thoughts, and feelings about their roles, as well as what they hoped to gain from Building Impact.

The Administrator Role Perception Survey (ARPS) is a 25-minute survey for center-based program administrators (Bella, et al. 2017). The ARPS incorporates the McCormick Institute's Whole Leadership Framework by assessing participant confidence levels across 36 competency items (rated on a 5-point scale; 1 = *I am not confident in my ability to*…; 5 = *I am very confident in my ability to*…) within its three domains, including administrative leadership, pedagogical leadership, and leadership essentials (McCormick Institute for Early Childhood, 2021). The ARPS identifies administrators' developmental career stages not by years of experience but by their perceptions of their mastery of key competencies in early childhood program leadership. Participants were asked to complete the ARPS both before the start of Building Impact and upon program completion.

The Participant Experience and Satisfaction Survey (PESS) was distributed to all participants at the conclusion of the leadership academy. Participants provided feedback on their experiences with program components, identified areas of professional growth, and discussed the impact of Building Impact on their professional development.

FINDINGS

Building Impact was explicitly designed to enhance administrators' competencies in the pedagogical leadership domain of the Whole Leadership Framework, build reflective coaching practices, foster distributed leadership and CQI, and increase data-informed decision-making. The following section presents key findings that illustrate the academy's effectiveness in advancing these goals and the resulting impacts on participants' leadership practices and program-level improvements.

Quantitative Findings

Whole Leadership Competency Development

To understand participants' levels of self-efficacy in specific leadership competency areas, participants were asked to rate their confidence in their own capacity to complete tasks or achieve goals relevant to their administrative role. Thirty-four participants completed both pre- and post-ARPS, which were used for paired t-test analyses.

Participants who completed Building Impact reported significant increases in confidence across all domains of the Whole Leadership Framework, with the most pronounced gains in pedagogical leadership. Paired *t*-tests revealed a statistically significant increase in mean pedagogical leadership between pre (M = 2.99, SD = 0.54) and post (M = 3.32, SD = 0.46; (t(33) = 4.05, p = .000)). Paired *t*-tests also found statistically significant gains in the other two Whole Leadership Domains as well as Total Whole Leadership (see Table 3 for details).

Table 3.
Changes in Whole Leadership Across Time

Whole Leadership Domain	Pre		Post		Average gain	*t*(33)*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Pedagogical Leadership	2.99	0.54	3.32	0.46	0.32	4.05***
Administrative Leadership	2.83	0.54	3.12	0.50	0.30	3.63***
Leadership Essentials	2.97	0.46	3.30	0.41	0.33	3.89***
Total Whole Leadership	2.93	0.49	3.25	0.43	0.32	4.05***

Note. *** p < .001, *N* = 34.

Targeted Competency Gains

Moreover, paired *t*-tests revealed statistically significant increases in 29 of the 36 Whole Leadership competency areas measured in the ARPS. Building Impact focused on building pedagogical leadership; therefore, competencies in that domain were of particular interest. Table 4 presents the pre- and post-means, average gains, and t-statistics for 11 competencies that were directly related to the academy's goals of increased reflective coaching practices, fostering distributed leadership, creating norms of continuous

quality improvement, and promoting data-informed decision-making. Mean changes reflect moderate gains across domains aligned with program emphasis.

Table 4.
Statistically Significant Changes in Administrative Leadership Competencies

Competency Area	Pre		Post		Average gain	*t*(33)*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Use self-reflection to improve my leadership practice	3.06	0.69	3.41	0.61	0.35	2.33*
Model best practices for teaching staff	3.32	0.54	3.56	0.50	0.24	2.77**
Protect time for staff	2.85	0.89	3.12	0.69	0.26	2.05*
Translate child development theory into practice	2.88	0.69	3.29	0.63	0.41	3.42***
Facilitate meetings that support team building and shared decision-making	3.06	0.65	3.38	0.65	0.32	2.34*
Implement intentional practices to share leadership among staff	2.79	0.64	3.26	0.62	0.47	3.88***
Observe teaching and learning, and provide feedback to teaching staff	3.00	0.82	3.53	0.62	0.53	3.21***
Regularly use program data (e.g., staff, family, and/or board feedback) to inform continuous quality improvement efforts	2.68	0.84	3.03	0.80	0.35	2.33*
Supervise staff to ensure a developmentally appropriate learning experience for children	3.18	0.67	3.41	0.56	0.24	2.26*
Support teaching staff in using aggregated data to support educational programming improvement	2.53	0.90	3.06	0.78	0.53	3.21***
Support teaching staff in using children's assessment data to support individualized instruction	3.00	0.74	3.32	0.73	0.32	2.24*

Note. Mean differences reflect posttest minus pretest confidence ratings; *p* values are two-tailed. Only competencies with statistically significant changes ($p < .05$) are presented. $N = 34$.

These findings indicate broad advancement in leadership competencies, particularly in self-reflection, modeling best practices, sharing leadership among staff, and using data for program improvement—areas central to the Building Impact theory of change. While quantitative findings confirm measurable growth in targeted competencies, qualitative data provide deeper insight into how participants translated these skills into practice.

Qualitative Findings

To complement quantitative results, the PESS asked participants to describe the most important changes they made as leaders since beginning the academy and to provide examples of program improvements resulting from Building Impact. These open-ended questions allowed evaluators to better understand leaders' perceptions of change in their own words.

Changes in Individual Leadership Practices

In the first open-ended question, participants were asked to provide two examples of changes they had made to their leadership practices as a result of Building Impact. Thirty-eight participants provided responses to two examples (a total of 76 responses). A hybrid thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke,

2006) was used, incorporating both deductive and inductive coding to capture anticipated and emergent patterns in participants' responses. This process yielded four broad themes, and a non-exclusive coding approach was employed, allowing individual responses to be assigned to more than one thematic category where appropriate. To establish coding reliability, a systematic inter-rater coding process was conducted on open-ended participant responses. A human researcher and an AI-assisted coder (Claude, Anthropic) independently applied a deductive coding scheme to 76 participant statements drawn from a survey administered to early childhood program administrators (Cohen's $\kappa = .90$, $p < .001$).

Results regarding leadership changes revealed that participants most frequently reported increased reflective and coaching-oriented leadership practices, greater self-awareness as leaders, increased distributed leadership, and greater competency in systems thinking and in using data to inform practice. These shifts suggest not only skill and knowledge acquisition but meaningful changes in leadership mindset and approach. Table 5 provides more details regarding the themes.

Table 5.
Themes Regarding Changes Made to Leadership Practices

Theme	Description	Frequency Mentioned	% of Responses
Reflective and Coaching-Oriented Leadership	Participants described becoming more reflective in their leadership practice and more intentional in how they listen, communicate, and engage with staff. Examples included leading with greater empathy, and shifting away from being primary problem solvers toward coaching approaches that support staff reflection, growth, and autonomy.	41	54%
Leadership Identity, Confidence, and Role Clarity	Participants described growth in their own leadership identity, including increased self-awareness and clarity about their role as early childhood administrators. Examples highlighted greater confidence in addressing challenges, communicating, and understanding their own strengths and areas for growth.	28	37%
Distributed Leadership	Participants described intentionally sharing leadership responsibilities by empowering staff, engaging in shared decision-making, and implementing collaborative structures such as peer learning teams.	6	8%
Strategic and Data-Informed Leadership	Participants described increased confidence and skill in strategic thinking and using data, assessment tools, and additional leadership resources to guide decision-making and coaching interactions. Examples included having a larger repertoire of administrative resources and using resources and data to think more systemically.	11	14%

Note. Seventy-six responses were coded using a hybrid thematic analysis approach. Percentages exceed 100% because responses were coded into multiple themes.

Program-Level Improvements

In the second open-ended item, participants were asked to provide two specific program improvements resulting from Building Impact. A hybrid thematic analysis was similarly used to explore patterns in responses. A total of 71 responses were coded; five were not coded because four were left blank, and one response indicated that the participant had left their previous organization. Examples that touched on more than one theme received multiple codes. Again, agreement between human and AI-assisted coding was assessed using Cohen's Kappa ($k = .90$, $p < .001$).

Participants reported implementing concrete program improvements across four primary areas: improving organizational culture and climate; building systems and structures for distributed leadership; using data to drive improvement efforts; and strengthening reflective leadership, coaching, and supervision practices. These changes demonstrate how leadership development translated into improvements at the organizational and classroom levels (see Table 6 for detailed descriptions).

Table 6.
Themes Regarding Program Improvements

Theme	Description	Frequency	% of Responses
Cultivating Trust, Communication, and Collaborative Culture	Participants reported improvements in staff relationships, communication, and overall organizational climate. Examples included stronger trust, more open communication, improved group dynamics, increased collaboration, stable staffing, and intentional efforts to create a supportive, family-like culture. Many described more meaningful and productive staff meetings and a shared sense of collective responsibility.	24	34%
Building Systems and Embedded Practices to Support Distributed Leadership	Participants described intentionally building or strengthening systems and structures to distribute leadership across their programs. Examples included implementing peer learning teams, creating opportunities for teacher voice and shared decision-making, developing teacher-driven strategies, delegating responsibilities, and embedding collaborative practices into program policies and procedures.	12	17%
Using Data to Drive Continuous Quality Improvement	Participants reported using data and quality rating tools to assess classrooms, guide teaching staff through instructional improvements, inform goal setting, and support continuous quality improvement. Improvements included scheduled observations, enhanced classroom environments and routines, and clearer use of data to drive decisions at both classroom and program levels.	14	20%

Strengthening Reflective Leadership, Coaching, and Supervision Practices	Participants described growth in their own reflective leadership practices as well as improvements in coaching, reflective supervision, and observation-based conversations with staff. Examples included becoming more intentional and reflective in their own leadership approach, using reflective methods to guide staff growth, supporting difficult conversations, modeling nonjudgmental practices, and helping teachers reflect on and improve their own teaching.	26	37%

Note. Seventy-one responses were coded using a hybrid thematic analysis approach. Percentages exceed 100% because responses were coded into multiple themes.

Program-level improvements mirrored these individual leadership changes. Participants reported stronger relationships, improved organizational culture, increased collaboration, and distributed leadership, as well as the implementation of structured supports such as peer learning teams and reflective supervision. Leaders also described greater use of data and assessment tools to guide improvement at the program, classroom, and individual levels. These open-ended responses suggest that leadership development translated into shifts in leadership practices and tangible program improvements.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest a coherent pattern of change related to Building Impact. Participants reported greater confidence and competence in reflective, relational, coaching-oriented, and data-informed leadership, and they described corresponding changes in program structures, staff relationships, and instructional practices. These results indicate that Building Impact helped bridge learning and day-to-day practice by supporting administrators in translating new knowledge and skills into concrete changes within their programs. This pattern aligns with Talan et al. (2014), who evaluated a similar 10-month leadership development program and found evidence of both individual growth and organizational improvement, suggesting that sustained, intensive training focused on the unique needs of early childhood administrators produces meaningful and measurable change.

Participants described the emergence of peer learning teams, stronger collaboration, and more intentional decision-making, indicating that leadership development extended beyond individual skill-building to influence program culture and shared responsibility. These outcomes underscore the value of sustained, relationship-centered leadership development models that connect reflection, practice, and peer support.

Overall, the evaluation suggests that Building Impact advanced its core aims of strengthening pedagogical leadership, reflective coaching practices, distributed leadership, and data-informed decision-making. Participants not only reported growth in leadership confidence and capability but also identified tangible improvements in program climate, collaboration, and instructional quality. These findings reinforce the promise of leadership academies that combine rigorous content with opportunities for applied practice and ongoing peer collaboration.

Caution is warranted in interpreting these findings. This exploratory study did not include a comparison group, so observed changes cannot be attributed exclusively to Building Impact. In addition, survey participation was voluntary, leading to variability in sample sizes and potential response bias. Because the data relied heavily on self-reported perceptions, the findings may not fully capture observed practice change. This evaluation reflects two cohorts supported within the context of Building Impact Indiana, so future research should examine whether similar outcomes emerge when data collection is required as part of the academy and whether results are replicated in other states or implementation settings. Future research should also incorporate an evaluation component examining teacher leaders' experiences, including their perceptions of role clarity, confidence, collaboration, and the extent to which participation supports their leadership growth.

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