# Someone Saw a Leader in Me: The Power of Believing in Your Staff

## BY JESSICA IANDOLA, B.S.

*What if the next great leader in early childhood education is already working in your program but doesn't recognize their potential yet?*

As early childhood leaders, we often think about the impact we have on the children, families, and programs we serve. But we may not fully recognize the lasting impact we can have on the educators who work alongside us.

There is something incredibly powerful about having someone believe in you, especially when you haven't yet learned to believe in yourself. A few words of encouragement, recognition of a strength you didn't know you had, or an opportunity to try something new can change the way you see yourself and what you believe is possible. As leaders, we have the opportunity to be that person for someone else, often without realizing just how much our belief in them can mean.

## SOMEONE SAW SOMETHING IN ME

When I began my journey in early childhood education, I never imagined becoming a leader. My passion was working with young children, and I pictured my career in the classroom.

At the early childhood program where I last worked primarily as a classroom teacher, my director and assistant director recognized potential in me that I hadn't yet recognized in myself. They encouraged me to explore new opportunities and, more importantly, gave me the chance to grow.

I began mentoring new teachers and assistant teachers, teaching enrichment activities, and taking on responsibilities that challenged me to develop new skills. With their encouragement, I also returned to school to pursue my bachelor's degree, something I had never imagined myself doing.

Those experiences helped me build confidence and begin seeing myself as a leader. My professional journey eventually led me into administrative leadership roles within early childhood programs, followed by work at a child care resource and referral agency, and ultimately to my current role with the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood.

Looking back, what made the greatest difference wasn't simply being given new responsibilities. It was knowing that someone believed I was capable of more, even when I wasn't sure of it myself.

I often wonder if those two leaders realize just how much their belief in me influenced my professional journey. What may have seemed like simple encouragement to them became something much greater for me.

That's the kind of impact we can have as early childhood leaders.

## RECOGNIZING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL IN YOUR STAFF

Leadership potential doesn't always look the way we expect. It may be the educator who naturally supports a new colleague, builds meaningful relationships with families, finds creative solutions to challenges, or brings organization and fresh ideas to the team.

In "Moving to Smart: Bringing Leadership into Early Childhood Education," Murphy et al. (2024) describe educators developing their leadership identities by sharing expertise, facilitating workshops, and learning from colleagues.

Leadership development doesn't mean every educator needs to become an administrator. It can mean mentoring others, supporting family engagement, leading a project, or finding new ways to contribute to the program. What matters is recognizing each person's strengths and creating opportunities to build on them.

## FIVE WAYS TO INVEST IN YOUR STAFF'S LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

### 1. Recognize strengths and show appreciation often.

Don't underestimate the power of letting educators know they're doing something well. When you notice a staff member supporting a colleague, connecting with a family, or going above and beyond, take a moment to acknowledge it. If you hear positive feedback about someone, share it with them! Be specific about what you appreciate and why it matters. Sometimes, a few genuine words of encouragement can help an educator recognize strengths they hadn't seen in themselves.

### 2. Create opportunities for staff to share their strengths.

Give educators opportunities to lead in areas where they excel or feel passionate. Invite a teacher who is great at building family relationships to share communication strategies, or ask someone with strong organizational skills to help lead a program initiative. Consider having staff members plan and facilitate professional development trainings on topics they're knowledgeable about or interested in, or mentor new colleagues. These opportunities should support professional growth rather than simply add to an educator's workload. Giving staff the chance to share their expertise and take on new challenges can help build their confidence and leadership skills.

### 3. Encourage continued education and support their journey.

Sometimes, educators need someone to encourage them to take that next step. Talk with staff about their professional goals and encourage them to explore college coursework, degrees, credentials, or other learning opportunities. For those considering returning to school, help them identify resources, navigate challenges, and find ways to balance their responsibilities when possible. Continue checking in, offering encouragement, and reminding them of what they're capable of achieving.

### 4. Provide mentorship and celebrate achievements.

Leadership growth takes time, and ongoing support can make all the difference. Offer guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement as educators take on new challenges. Just as importantly, celebrate their progress! Whether someone completes a course, earns a credential, successfully leads a

project, or steps outside their comfort zone, take time to recognize the accomplishment. Celebrating both small and significant milestones show educators that their hard work and growth matter.

**5. Create a culture where everyone has the opportunity to grow.**

Encourage staff members to share ideas, try new things, and contribute their unique strengths to the program. Create an environment where educators feel comfortable asking questions, learning from challenges, and exploring new opportunities. Remember that leadership growth doesn't always mean moving into administration. Sometimes it's about becoming more confident, supporting colleagues, or making a greater impact in their current role.

## TAKE YOUR LEADERSHIP SKILLS FURTHER

Supporting the growth of others also means continuing to grow as leaders ourselves. The McCormick Institute for Early Childhood's *Aim4Excellence National Director Credential* consists of nine online modules designed to strengthen leadership knowledge and skills across different areas of early childhood program administration for current and aspiring leaders.

In particular, *Module 3: Promoting Peak Performance* underscores the importance of investing in staff. This module focuses on coaching, mentoring, recognizing individual strengths, and supporting professional growth to help leaders create environments where educators feel valued, encouraged, and empowered to reach their potential.

As we continue developing our own leadership skills, we become better equipped to recognize and nurture the potential in those we lead.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What strengths do the educators on your team demonstrate, and how could those strengths become leadership opportunities?
- How can you create meaningful opportunities for staff to grow while supporting their individual interests and goals?
- What is one thing you can do this week to show an educator that you believe in their potential?

## THE POWER OF BELIEVING IN SOMEONE

When I look back on my professional journey, I often think about the two leaders who saw something in me that I couldn't yet see in myself. They may never fully realize how much their encouragement and belief in me changed the direction of my career. What may have seemed like small moments to them became opportunities that helped shape who I am today.

As early childhood leaders, we have the incredible opportunity to make that same difference in the lives of the educators we support. We may not always see the impact of our words, our encouragement, or the opportunities we provide, but that doesn't mean the impact isn't there. Sometimes, believing in someone is the very thing that helps them begin to believe in themselves.

Every educator has strengths worth recognizing and potential worth nurturing. And sometimes, the most

meaningful thing we can do as leaders is help someone discover what they're truly capable of.

Someone once saw a leader in me before I could see one in myself. **Who might be waiting for you to see the leader in them?**

***Jessica Iandola, B.S.,*** is the Aim4Excellence Specialist and State Registry Coordinator at the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University, where she works directly with current and aspiring early childhood leaders pursuing the National Director Credential and strengthening their leadership and management skills. With more than 15 years of experience in the early childhood field, Jessica brings a broad perspective shaped by her work as a classroom teacher, program director, and Child Care Resource and Referral specialist. She holds a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education with a concentration in Early Childhood Business Administration and is currently pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA). As an Aim4Excellence alumna and member of the Exchange Leadership Initiative (ELI), Jessica is passionate about mentorship, leadership development, and cultivating strong leaders from within the early childhood field. She believes in the power of sharing knowledge, building meaningful relationships, and helping leaders recognize their strengths and grow in confidence and capability. Through her work, Jessica strives to ensure early childhood leaders feel valued, supported, and equipped to lead thriving programs and make a meaningful impact in their communities.