

## Process of Self-Leadership: Establishing Yourself as Leader No Matter Your Role

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Volume 20, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111184ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22230/ijep.2024v20n1a1315>

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Publisher(s)

Simon Fraser University, University of Delaware, Phi Delta Kappa International

ISSN

1555-5062 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

George-Puskar, A., Beavers, E., Bruns, D. & Lindner, C. (2024). Process of Self-Leadership: Establishing Yourself as Leader No Matter Your Role. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, 20(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.22230/ijep.2024v20n1a1315>

Article abstract

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## Process of Self-Leadership: Establishing Yourself as Leader No Matter Your Role

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### Abstract

As the field of early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) focuses intently on building, supporting, and sustaining leaders across varying contexts and roles, this study introduced the concept of self-leadership to EI/ECSE self-identified leaders. The research explores differences in self-rated skills based on role, analyzes themes of goals for developing self-leadership skills, and analyzes the measurability of goals set by participants. Fifty-six participants completed the Abbreviated Self-Leadership Questionnaire (ASLQ) (Houghton, Dawley, & DiLiello, 2012), self-rated their own skills, and identified leadership goals. Results show that participants scored themselves highest on *evaluating beliefs and assumptions* about self-leadership. Self-identified goals resulted in three primary themes (administrative tasks, relationship building and coaching, and growth in learning). Directions for future research, policy, and recommendations for practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** self-leadership, early intervention, early childhood special education, leadership development, self-reflective leadership, goal setting

Annie George-Puskar, Elizabeth Beavers, Deborah Bruns, & Chloe Lindner. (2024). Process of Self-Leadership: Establishing Yourself as Leader No Matter Your Role. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 20(1). URL: <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/1315> doi:10.22230/ijepl.2024v20n1a1315

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## Introduction

Effective leadership in early childhood education (ECE) and early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) is a critical factor that can impact positive outcomes for children and families as well as practitioners and programs. Leadership scholars have identified definitive styles, characteristics, and personality traits associated with great leaders (Courtney, Gunter, Niesche, & Trujillo, 2021; Fullan, 2020; Kouzes & Posner, 2016). The need to nurture and expand the leadership capacities of all professionals in ECE and EI/ECSE, regardless of role or title, is an emerging topic in the field (Movahedazarhouli, 2021). However, a major challenge in ECE settings is that individual programs are operating in local contexts (Goffin & Daga, 2017). As such, leadership development opportunities are varied across settings, and can often result in a focus on improving administrative or management skills rather than truly developing oneself as a leader (Douglass, Halle, Kirby, & Nagle, 2022). This article reports on research that introduces the topic of self-leadership to ECE and EI/ECSE professionals, assesses self-ratings of leadership, and analyzes goals aimed at building leadership skills. The analysis of literature associated with self-leadership, particularly through the lens of individual attributes and cultural considerations, builds on the existing self-leadership research in business and management. This groundwork informs our current study and provides the basis for recommendations aimed at further developing the body of research in self-leadership within the contexts of ECE and EI/ECSE.

## Leadership in early childhood education and early intervention/ early childhood special education

Existing literature clearly indicates leadership in ECE is unique given the range of contexts and variables, along with distinctions in the guiding values of programs (Kivunja, 2015). This uniqueness becomes even more distinct when analyzing leadership in EI/ECSE (Movahedazarhouli, 2021). Most research specific to leadership in ECE and EI/ECSE focuses on the skills, knowledge, and attributes of leaders and is often presented as descriptive (Bruns, LaRocco, Sopko, & Sharp, 2017). Further, emerging leadership research in ECE and EI/ECSE has a pattern of recognizing the need to understand what leadership looks like in ECE programs (Kirby et al., 2021; McCrea, 2015), the contextual influences that inform leadership development and support (Kivunja, 2015; McCrea, 2015; Noman & Gurr, 2020), and the actions of leaders. Understanding the role and practices of leaders across ECE settings is crucial to sustain a system that can effectively support the needs of young children and their families (Shonkoff, 2022). Within the larger ECE context, the field of EI/ECSE requires an emphasis on effective models for building, supporting, and sustaining leaders (Movahedazarhouli, 2021).

Given the range of programmatic contexts in EI/ECSE, there is a need to promote and build a system of sustainable leadership across all stakeholders in the field. However, similar to other areas of education and business, an element of the Peter Principle exists (Peter & Hull, 1969). The Peter Principle is defined as a person rising in title and rank according to how they performed in their previous positions, even if a new promoted position requires a different set of skills and competencies. Those

who tend to be promoted are often evaluated on being a “good worker” (Benson, Li, & Shue, 2019) rather than on the skills and competencies needed to be an effective leader. For example, in educational settings, strong and competent classroom teachers are promoted to team leader or administrative positions. In EI, we see skilled and competent direct child and family service providers promoted to program directors or other administrators.

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) offers a set of recommended practices (2014) to guide services and support for young children and their families. One of the seven topics covered in the recommendations is leadership. Of the 14 leadership practices, the majority address adhering to standards and policies (e.g., L7 Leaders develop, refine, and implement policies and procedures that create the conditions for practitioners to implement the DEC Recommended Practices) and/or teaming and collaboration (e.g., L13 Leaders promote efficient and coordinated service delivery for children and families by creating the conditions for practitioners from multiple disciplines and the family to work together as a team). In further examining the recommended practices, Bruns, LaRocco, Sopko, and Sharp (2017) identify leadership competencies in six knowledge areas (child development, evidence-based practices, state laws and regulations, family-centred approaches, federal laws and regulations, and group processes) as well as five competency areas (professional learning, effective relationships, shared responsibility, data use, and effective communication).

Self-reflection as a key component in self-leadership is emphasized in business and management literature as leaders aim to grow in their own capacity (Bryant & Kazan, 2012). Interestingly, there is little mention in the literature of cultivating a skill set to provide leadership to others as well as continue to build leadership within oneself. Further, the DEC recommended practices lack emphasis on self-reflection and evaluation of one’s attitudes and skills related to leadership in EI/ECSE settings. This is interesting given DEC’s mission statement:

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) promotes policies and advances evidence-based practices that support families and enhance the optimal development of young children (0-8) who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities. (2014, About Us, para. 5).

With the emphasis of the recommended practices on leadership, it appears there is a need to incorporate a process focus to guide all types of EI/ECSE leaders.

At present, there continues to be a call for leadership as practice (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008; Shonkoff, 2022), leaders as collaborative change agents (Raelin, 2014), and leadership as advocacy (Stegenga, Skubel, Corr, & Nagro, 2022). Whether based in EI/ECSE or other fields, the definition of leadership is taking on a broader view, which better aligns with practice. A leader is not defined by their position or title, but by a mindset. It is an ongoing, formative process. Yet most tasks and activities focus on day-to-day responsibilities that align more with management than leadership development, often with limited opportunities for personal growth (Carroll et al., 2008). The role of self-reflection as part of self-leadership is to focus on who the leader is as a person, how they will develop others around them, the connection between truly knowing oneself as (and believing oneself to be) a leader, and their actions and behaviours to demonstrate leadership.

## Self-leadership

Charles C. Manz first defined self-leadership as “a comprehensive self-influence perspective that concerns leading oneself” (1983, p. 5). While the concept of self-leadership in business and management exists in the literature, there is a need to bridge this knowledge into the field of educational leadership. Chavez, Gomez, Valenzuela, and Perera (2016) emphasize that in order to develop self-leadership skills, individuals must be aware of their behaviours and how they affect others. Leaders need to understand how their behaviours may be perceived differently from what they intend and therefore adjust behaviours based on feedback to be effective leaders (Alimo-Metcalfe & Nyfield, 1998). Impactful leadership requires individuals adapting their skills and patterns of practices according to the highly contextualized environments in which they work (Noman & Gurr, 2020). Self-leadership aims to help individuals expand the lens through which they introspectively consider how to nurture and positively impact their own leadership practices and resulting spheres of influence. Self-leaders do this by bringing *self* to the forefront when examining complex and relational contexts.

Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2010) emphasize the interplay between self-leadership and external leadership. For individuals to be effective agents of change and impact, literature has focused on the importance of building self-leadership skills (Harari, Williams, Castro, & Brant, 2021). Steinhardt, Dolbier, Mallon, and Trace Adams (2003) suggest when individuals enhance their internal leadership attributes, they increase the effectiveness of their interactions with others, ultimately impacting others. Self-leadership involves the practice of understanding who you are, identifying your desired experiences, and intentionally guiding yourself toward the intended outcomes. A more current definition of self-leadership is developing a sense of who you are (as a person and leader), what you are able to do, and how to navigate the direction you go along with the ability to influence your own responses (communication, emotion, and behaviour) in order to progress (Bryant & Kazan, 2012). Further, Du Plessis (2019) discusses positive self-leadership, referring to the application of one’s own strengths to self-influencing behaviours. It spans determination of what we do, why we do it, and how we do it.

## Evaluating oneself as a leader

Often, teachers or other ECE personnel do not consider themselves to be leaders if they are not holding an administrative or titled leadership position (Bruns, LaRocco, Sopko, & Sharp, 2017). As a field, EI/ECSE needs to focus on the development of leaders at all levels, and support individuals with the process of looking inward so they can have an impact and outward influence. In doing so, professionals in the field must use self-reflection to identify their own leadership qualities and attributes, design specific target areas of growth, and utilize effective strategies, including ongoing reflection as part of practice and the impact of this process both internally and externally. Manz (1986) outlines the process of self-leadership as how one influences one’s own behaviours through the utilization of varied strategies, which include work context strategies (e.g., choosing a preferred work setting), task performance process strategies (e.g., self-reward and self-observation), and strategies that influence one’s

thought patterns (e.g., examining one's own beliefs and assumptions, use of mental imagery, and self-talk) (Flores, Jiang, & Manz, 2018). Rather than a dependence on external factors that guide their work-related leadership skills, this multidimensional construct considers the way individuals make decisions grounded in authenticity and personal ownership of actions and how those actions are influenced by one's values (Harari et al., 2021; Manz, 2015).

### **Building on current leadership research in early intervention/ early childhood special education**

Movahedazarhouli (2021) conducted a comprehensive review of leadership research literature applicable to ECE and EI/ECSE. While results revealed an overall lack of targeted research centered on EI/ECSE, the study also emphasized a lack of research focused on professional development for leaders. In the year prior to the implementation of the current study, the first two authors, along with their colleagues, conducted a workshop for the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children pre-conference session on building leadership capacity (George-Puskar et al., 2021). The workshop emphasized the use of self-reflection and action planning. The team developed a self-reflection questionnaire on capacity building practices, relationship building practices, and coaching practices based on the work of Dunst et al., (2018). Participants were asked to rate their behaviours in each of these areas in their interactions with their supervisors (those who were responsible for evaluating them) and with their colleagues (those who had a similar level of job responsibility). The data suggest that most of the participants indicated that they were most skilled in their ability to build relationships (George-Puskar, Beavers, & Bruns, in preparation). The self-reflection data led participants to establish goals in an action plan for developing their own leadership competencies. Most of the goals emphasized coaching practices (52.5%), followed by confidence building practices (26.3%), and relationship building practices (21.1%). While the authors were not surprised by the emphasis in the goal area, the connection between the self-reflection responses and the emphasis areas of goals was lacking (George-Puskar, Beavers, & Bruns, in preparation). The need to support leader participants in establishing measurable goals to impact meaningful change in their own leadership behaviours was recommended as a topic of further research.

### **Purpose of study**

There is a need for quality research on leadership in EI/ECSE (Movahedazarhouli, 2021), with particular emphasis on how individuals identify themselves as leaders. The purpose of this study is to build on previous work done in leadership development (George-Puskar et al., in preparation) with a strong emphasis on the process of self-leadership, regardless of title or role within an organization. Specifically, this research seeks to expose self-identified leaders to the concept of self-leadership, measure self-ratings, and analyze the self-identified goals individuals write to promote their individual self-growth in building leadership competence. The research questions that guided this study and the analysis of data were:

1. Is there a difference in responses on a self-leadership questionnaire between program administrators and other self-identified leaders?
2. What are the primary themes of self-identified goals in self-leadership in early intervention and early childhood special education constructed as part of a workshop?
3. Do participants of a leadership workshop write measurable goals for growth in self-leadership?

## **Methods**

### **Setting**

An international IE/ECSE conference co-sponsored by the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children and the International Society on Early Intervention was hosted in fall 2022 in the Midwest of the United States. Attendees represented 35 countries and over 1600 people registered to attend the conference. The data reported in this study were collected as part of a workshop presented on self-leadership.

### **Participants**

There were 87 registered attendees for the pre-conference workshop. A total of  $N = 63$  people attended at least a portion of the workshop (three participants came late and/or left early). The participants ranged in their professional roles within early intervention and/or early childhood special education systems (i.e., consultants, doctoral students, program managers/coordinators/directors, parents, teachers, and regional/state administrators).

Most participants worked in the Midwest region of the United States (50%). Participants also worked in the east (6.7%), west (23.3%), south (20%), and outside of the United States (9.1%). Participants represented three countries ( $n = 80$  from the United States,  $n = 2$  from Canada, and  $n = 4$  from Singapore) and 17 U.S. states and territories. Additional demographic information was not collected as part of conference workshop registration or provided to the researchers.

### **Procedures**

This study was approved by the institutional review board from the first author's institution and the conference hosting organization research committee. The workshop was structured so that information was presented by a session leader and small group discussions were prompted for the attendees. Attendees sat at round tables of roughly eight people at each table. Attendees selected their own seat upon entering the workshop room. Throughout the workshop, there were opportunities for self-reflection, discussions, and individual goal writing.

### **Measures**

Attendees were asked to complete the Abbreviated Self-Leadership Questionnaire (ASLQ)—a nine-item, three-factor survey with a five-point Likert scale (Houghton, Dawley, & DiLiello, 2012) in Google Forms. This revised self-leadership measurement scale is based on existing measures of self-leadership skills and related strategies.



Specifically, it was modelled on the Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire (Houghton & Neck, 2002). The ASLQ examines three primary categories of strategies: behaviour-focused strategies, constructive thought strategies, and natural reward strategies (see Table 1 for the questionnaire items and see Houghton & Neck, 2002 for full scale). Through a combination of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, Houghton, Dawley, & DiLiello (2012) determined the nine-item ALSQ to be a valid and reliable abbreviated measure of self-leadership. The coefficient alpha revealed an acceptance reliability level of 0.73. Further, the developers of the instrument suggest it is a useful tool for measuring broad indicators of self-leadership. The questionnaire asks respondents to rate themselves on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Separately, attendees were asked to write responses to three prompts around their own strengths as leaders as well as areas in which they hoped to improve: 1) as a leader, what are my top three strengths?; 2) what is my purpose (related to leadership)?; and 3) what are my positive habits as a leader?. The workshop leaders facilitated small group discussions, a series of reflective exercises, and opportunities for the attendees to reflect on their own roles as leaders. The workshop facilitators also spent time presenting the aspects of creating measurable goals and the elements needed for measurability (target behaviour or action, the condition (when and where) of the goal, and criteria for successful completion). It should be noted that time was spent addressing this area because of the previous year's data showed that goals were not written in a way that were measurable. Attendees were asked to write down their self-leadership goal on a reflection sheet. Attendees who consented to participate and have their responses used as part of data analysis returned the written goal to the facilitators at the end of the workshop. None of the responses used in data analysis provided identifiable information and workshop attendees were not required to return their responses to the facilitators, making participation voluntary and anonymous. The written reflection question responses and the written goals were transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet by the fourth author and used for data analysis.

### **Data analysis**

To answer research question 1, the researchers analyzed the responses of the nine-item questionnaire provided to workshop attendees (Houghton & Neck, 2002; Houghton, Dawley, & DiLiello, 2012). Descriptive statistics were calculated across each item of the questionnaire across all participants. In a subsequent analysis, the participants were divided into two groups: administrative title (such as program director, coordinator, or state-level administrator) and non-administrative title. A one-tailed one-sample *t*-test was conducted to determine any statistically significant difference between self-reported administrators and other self-identified leaders as workshop attendees. Significance value of .05 was used and effect size was measured using  $r = Z/\sqrt{n}$ . Participants submitted their responses through Google Forms. All responses were converted and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS.

To answer research question 2, the goals that were self-identified were extracted from an Excel spreadsheet. The authors looked at goals separate from the nine-item questionnaire to analyze the primary themes of the self-identified goals from the par-



ticipants. First, the goals were identified based on “self” or “others.” “Self” goals were defined as goals set by the participant in which their own behaviours were the focus of what they wanted to achieve as a leader and “other” goals were defined as goals set by the participant that focused on what others on their team were doing as part of the goal. The purpose of this analysis was to determine if a workshop focused on self-leadership led participants to take the opportunity to focus goals on themselves rather than outcomes of others as a measure of their own leadership.

The second phase of analysis involved an inductive-emergent coding approach, based on Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This approach was selected to allow for identification of common themes while preserving valuable individual contextual information from the EI/ECSE professionals’ self-identified leadership goals. After the initial immersive data analysis, the captured codes were refined and collapsed into categories. The authors reviewed the categories and outcome statements with an expert in early childhood leadership to ensure consensus of wording, category themes, and statements (Tesch, 2013).

The measurability of each goal was analyzed to answer research question 3. As learned from previous research, the measurability of goals was lacking when personnel self-identified goals for leadership growth (George-Puskar et al., in preparation). During the workshop, elements of measurability in goals were discussed. The facilitators provided a template (fill-in-the-blank statement) to provide a guide for participants to support measurable goals. Each goal was assessed and scored based on the elements of measurability presented in the workshop (behaviour/action, condition, criteria). Each goal received one point for each of the elements of measurability, with a possible total score of three.

## Results and findings

### **Research question 1: Quantitative analysis**

Of the 63 participants who attended the pre-conference workshop, 60 attendees completed the ASLQ survey, and 56 participants provided consent for data analysis with the self-leadership questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were calculated to show the minimum score a participant reported, maximum score, the mean score across participants, the median score across participants, and the standard deviation (see Table1). The scale ranged from 1 (not at all accurate) to 5 (completely accurate). On average, item 7 (Sometimes I talk to myself [out loud or in my head] to work through difficult situations [*evaluating beliefs and assumptions*]) had the highest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 4.45$ ) and item 5 (Sometimes I picture in my mind a successful performance before I actually do a task [*visualizing performance*]) had the lowest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 3.25$ ). Participants scored items 1-6 as “1,” and items 7-9 each had a minimum score of “2.”

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for self-leadership questionnaire (N = 56)**

Item	Min	Max	M	Median	SD	Variance
1. I establish specific goals for my own performance ( <i>self-goal setting</i> )	1	5	3.46	4	1.09	1.20
2. I make a point to keep track of how well I'm doing at work ( <i>self-observation</i> )	1	5	3.43	4	0.95	0.90
3. I work toward specific goals I have set for myself ( <i>self-goal setting</i> )	1	5	3.54	4	0.83	0.69

**Table 1 (continued)**

Item	Min	Max	M	Median	SD	Variance
4. I visualize myself successfully performing a task before I do it ( <i>visualizing performance</i> )	1	5	3.30	3	1.20	1.45
5. Sometimes I picture in my mind a successful performance before I actually do a task ( <i>visualizing performance</i> )	1	5	3.25	3	1.21	1.46
6. When I successfully completed a task, I often reward myself with something I like ( <i>self-reward</i> )	1	5	3.30	3.5	1.20	1.45
7. Sometimes I talk to myself (out loud or in my head) to work through difficult situations ( <i>evaluating beliefs and assumptions</i> )	2	5	4.45	5	0.89	0.80
8. I try to mentally evaluate the accuracy of my own beliefs about situations I am having problems with ( <i>self-talk</i> )	2	5	4.0	4	0.76	0.58
9. I think about my own beliefs and assumptions whenever I encounter a difficult situation ( <i>evaluating beliefs and assumptions</i> )	2	5	4.05	4	0.84	0.71

To answer the other component of research question 1, the researchers conducted a one-sample *t*-test. No significant differences were found between self-reported administrators and other self-identified leaders on each of the 6 variables observed based on the construct identified in the ASLQ (see Table 2).

**Table 2: One-sample *t*-test: Comparing administrators and other self-identified leaders on self-leadership questionnaire items**

Item totals	Administrators		Non-admin		<i>t</i> -test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Evaluating beliefs and assumptions	4.29	1.47	4.50	.577	-.287
Self-observation	3.46	.897	4.00	.816	-1.15
Self-reward	3.29	1.235	3.50	.577	-.341
Self-talk	3.90	.759	4.00	.816	-.239
Self-goal setting	3.86	2.055	3.50	1.00	-.614
Visualizing performance	6.86	2.193	5.75	2.63	.951

**Research question 2: Qualitative analysis**

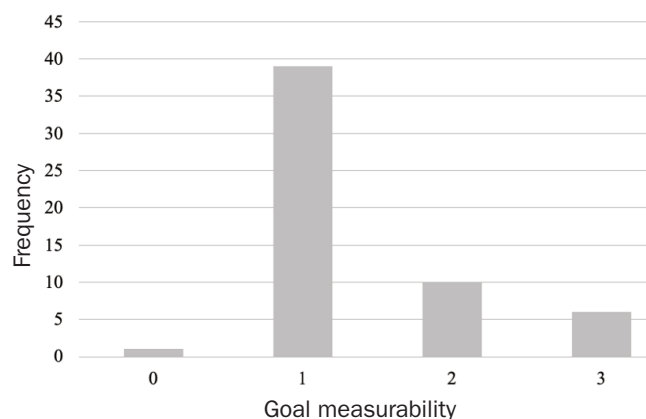
A total of 56 goals were provided to analyze for the qualitative goal analysis. The first phase of the analysis—identifying if goals were written with a focus on “self” or “others”—resulted in only 53.6 percent of the goals focused on “self.” Examples of goals around “self” included reading on a personally identified topic in leadership, engaging in opportunities of self-reflection, and engaging in self-dialog to prepare for meetings. Specific goal statements of “self” goals included “Digging into strengths and habits to gain self-awareness by reading the articles [provided] on strengths, making connections to the strengths I have and do a daily self-reflection form” and “engage in positive, empowering self-dialog ... measured by stress level and clarity on how I express myself.” The remaining 46.4 percent of the goals focused on “others”. Examples

of goals around “others” included focusing on interactions with team members, blocking time on calendars for relationship building, and focusing on the contributions being made in conversations with others. Specific goal statements included “Make more time and space for others to share thoughts/feelings measured by 1) setting a 10-minute timer for check-ins, and 2) asking if everyone is ready to move on” and “be specific when assigning duties to staff.”

The second phase of the qualitative analysis of the goals involved the inductive-emergent theming of goal areas. The theming resulted in three primary themes: administrative tasks, relationship building and coaching, and growth in learning. The highest percentage of goals were themed as “growth” goals (46.4%), in which participants focused on elements of growing knowledge or a skill set in their own leadership. Specific examples of goal statements in this theme included “read books” and “take time once a week to journal and reflect each Friday.” The second most prevalent theme was relationship building and coaching; (32.2%) that is, behaviours and practices aimed at developing relationships with team members or supervisors or improving communication with others on their team. Specific goal statements in this theme included: “use coaching interactions with leadership team members during bimonthly individual meetings as measured by self-reflection tools” and “be in a community inclusive site, not to evaluate staff by to build relationships with staff and community stakeholders at least three times every week by the end of June 2023.” Administrative tasks made up the fewest goals (21.4%) and emphasized job-related responsibilities that are not related to the self-leadership growth (such as holding meetings, setting calendar times for specific work tasks, and keeping a record of activities). Specific goal statements in this theme included: “actively engage in PartB/619 meetings,” “read state policies,” “complete projects within work time,” and “keep open time in calendar to do work.”

Finally, all the goals were analyzed for measurability. Every goal was coded by the first and second author for consensus with a 1 or a 0 for each of the measurability criteria (target behaviour/knowledge/skill, condition, and criteria). Out of the 56 goals, 55 goals (98.2%) identified a target behaviour, specific skill, or area of knowledge, 10 goals (17.9%) included the condition in which the goal would be addressed, and 12 goals (21.4%) included the criteria for how a goal would be measured. Of the 56 goals, six goals (10.7%) received a score of 3 (indicating that all elements of measurability were included in the goal statement). Of the remaining goals, 10 goals (17.9%) received a score of 2, 39 goals (69.6%) received a score of 1, and one goal (1.7%) received a score of 0 (indicating that none of the measurable criteria were met) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Measurability scores of N = 56 goals**



## Discussion

This study aimed to look at the self-leadership behaviours of self-reported and self-identified leaders in EI/ECSE. Leadership is not equated with title or role, but every-

one can be, and everyone is, a leader (DEC, 2014). The study gathered survey data and qualitative reporting from  $N = 56$  participants in a workshop on the process of self-leadership. Data were analyzed to answer three main research questions.

It should be noted that the authors recognize the limitations in the sample size of quantitative data for statistical analysis. However, considering the lack of available research in this area, these results support further research into self-leadership in an educational setting. While the authors did not find any statistically significant difference between participants with a self-reported leadership title/role and other self-identified leaders, this can be attributed to participants self-selecting to attend the workshop. Participants voluntarily signed up for the workshop session and paid to attend. Those who identify as leaders could possibly be more likely to sign up for the workshop than those who do not see themselves as leaders in the field of EI/ECSE. There are many other variables that could impact the results that need further exploration with future research. For example, creating a connection between self-reflection and goal setting and more long-term planning and coaching as part of leadership development is a worthy area of study. Also, the trend of non-administrative titles ranking themselves higher in terms of self-leadership, on average, than administrative leaders is something to further explore.

The results from the data analysis suggest that there is a need to promote self-leadership learning experiences to all professionals in EI/ECSE, especially for those who may not consider themselves to be leaders since their job title is not administrative (Bruns, LaRocco, Sopko, & Sharp, 2017). The participants reported above-average levels on each of the questionnaire items and constructs, which indicates that many participants may already see themselves as strong leaders, which may also help to explain the non-significant differences in our statistical analysis. There may be a need for more consistent periodic intervention to be able to see a behavioural change in self-leadership processes. It would be beneficial to continue this research area and impose more coaching and long-term support to see self-leadership behaviour changes over time.

The goals that the participants set for themselves were evaluated for category, theme, and measurability. The authors were surprised that even after an intentional focus on self-leadership through the pre-conference workshop, the self-identified leaders continued to write goals that were focused on others. Based on the data analysis, it seems that participants in leadership roles by title (i.e., administrators) have a difficult time removing themselves from what others are doing to identify what it is they need to do for themselves in self-leadership development. This is also demonstrated by leaders setting some goals specifically around administrative tasks and being motivated by an outcomes-driven evaluation of successful goal completion. This pattern in goal setting can be understood through the theory of social cognition or social learning (Bandura, 1977). The environment impacts how one sets goals, such as your supervisor or manager and the behavioural expectations for evaluation. The goal-setting behaviour of focusing on others can be explained by the organizational environment and external reinforcing factors (Neck, Nouri, & Godwin, 2003). We learn behaviours by watching others, so professionals in EI/ECSE are learning by observing their supervisors, observing rules, and practicing within the constraints of job descriptions and policies.

The other element of concern with participants' goal setting is the lack of measurability in the written goals. While the measurability improved from the previous year's data (George-Puskar et al., in preparation), there was still a very low percentage of goals that met all three elements of measurable criteria. Research on self-leadership suggests that measurable goal setting is important for a variety of positive workplace outcomes (Steinmann, Klug, & Maier, 2018). However, results from the present study suggest that individuals continue to have a difficult time writing a measurable goal, even when instructed to do so and provided with a fill-in-the-blank template for goal creation. When asked to write measurable goals, most participants focused on administrative tasks, relationship building and coaching, and personal growth and learning (i.e., reading). But almost half of the goals focused on the outcome performance of others, rather than on oneself. The impact of measurability of goals is an area that warrants future research.

### ***Recommendations for future research***

Most research on self-leadership has been done in the United States and Western cultures. There is an individualistic and collective cultural influence on thinking and behaviours. To fully understand the impact of leaders, it is important to consider the cultural context in which leaders are coming into the field of EI/ECSE. The research in this area is sparse, so the authors looked into literature that emphasized self-leadership in a global context to situate the study presented in this article. Culturally, programs in United States and worldwide vary in how children with disabilities and their families are supported. Prior literature has noted that leadership behaviours can be influenced by intercultural and international differences (Alves, Lovelace, Manz, Matsypura, Toyasaki, & Ke, 2006; Ho & Nesbit, 2013). Cultural considerations and examining self-leadership through a global lens play an important role in identifying how these differences may impact leadership development. Alves et al. (2006) find that power distance, or the degree of equality or inequality accepted between people in a country's society, impacts the view and practice of self-leadership. In high power distance cultures, there is a greater acceptance of inequality of power. These cultures may interpret self-leadership as a form of increasing personal productivity and a part of being a responsible employee. While Western cultures, or low power distance cultures, may see self-leadership as a way to express autonomy. Similarly, Ho and Nesbit (2013) studied how culture influences organizational behaviour among Chinese and Australian students. It was found that when compared with Chinese students, Australian students are more likely to use self-goal setting and self-cueing and less likely to use relation-based natural rewards and socially oriented evaluation of beliefs and assumptions. Thus, it can be inferred that collective cultures place a greater emphasis on setting goals that shape desirable behaviours, while individualistic cultures use self-leadership strategies that improve their personal performance in a team environment.

Surprisingly, to the authors' knowledge, there is a lack of research on the influence of culture on the proclivity toward process or outcome goals in self-leadership. Previous international literature on goal-setting has focused on how culture impacts goal-setting and striving. In addition, there is a need to further explore the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors that play a role in an

individual's self-reflection as a practice. Particularly, it would be interesting to consider these factors when looking at those who hold titles of leadership compared with those who are not in leadership or administrative positions. It has been shown that individuals in collectivist cultures are more likely to pursue goals directed at improving a group's success rather than personal success. In contrast, those in individualistic cultures are more interested in goals that further the success of the self (Oettingen et al., 2008). Based on the available literature, it can be argued that cultural differences may impact an individual's goal orientation. However, it remains unclear how perceptions of different social norms and role expectations influence an individual's inclination toward an outcome or process goal.

Another area that would be important to consider is the use of self-leadership strategies that professionals engage in to support their leadership development. It is critical to focus on authenticity, responsibility, and expanded capacity. These three encompass ongoing self-evaluation through use of self-observation, goal setting, and a willingness to reinforce and be critical of oneself (Manz, 2015; Neck, Stewart, & Manz, 1995). In addition, to engage in self-leadership, an individual must be willing to challenge long-held beliefs and assumptions within the current context. There are myriad ways to accomplish this based on an individual's comfort level and willingness to accept feedback. It can be part of daily activities and/or a time set aside for reflection. An individual must also be open to listening to the perspective of others about themselves and, in turn, use that information to improve thoughts and actions. Finally, a focus on process and having that growth mindset (Dweck, 2015) rather than focusing only on outcomes is necessary for growth in self-leadership.

Finally, we also recommend considering the preservice preparation and training that professionals receive with respect to leadership development. It would be beneficial to explore curriculum and field options to explore and enhance this critical component for new ECSE professionals. Developing and reiterating the leadership mindset via course content and application activities should be standard. Most faculty already offer content on leadership, whether purposefully or not, but further and intentional integration may be needed. For example, ongoing self-reflection of strengths and professional development needs can be part of ECSE curriculums. Faculty can also build in discussions about leadership skills when focusing on topics such as those related to collaboration with families and service providers. It is important to consider both quantity and quality of a leadership focus especially with undergraduates with little to no direct experience in ECSE. Additional avenues for leadership opportunities through participation in a student organization, community outreach, and similar activities should also be encouraged.

## **Limitations**

As with any research, this study has several limitations. One limitation is that the recruitment of our sample was specific to those who were attending the in-person early childhood special education and early intervention conference, including having the financial resources to travel and pay any fees or associated costs with conference attendance. This provides us with initial data but being able to collect data from a wider range of self-identified EI/ECSE leaders from countries and leaders to better



understand equity in leadership, such as conducting more data collection and workshops online or presenters traveling to participants (rather than participants traveling to the presenters). In addition, ongoing feedback and opportunities for evaluation would benefit continued research to evaluate the quality of goal settings for leaders as they continue to improve their self-reflective practice.

There is also the likelihood of confirmation bias in participant responses during the conference session in terms of agreeing with one or more of the authors. Participants were also invited to share their thoughts several times during the session in oral and written form. Each opportunity resulted in some responses but not from the entire group. Lastly, the session was scheduled for three hours, which may have impacted participation.

## Conclusion

People are put into positions of administrative responsibility, but this does not automatically mean they have the leadership skills and competencies needed to be successful. For example, a strong provider for EI is promoted to a service coordinator. They are now in a position in which they must lead a team of adults because they were good at their job working effectively with children and families. In academia, we see this when faculty members or researchers have strong grant writing skills to secure external funding and are then in charge of hiring and managing teams of people to carry out the work that was funded.

The DEC position statement (2015) highlights that everyone can be and is a leader; however, it is up to the field to identify ways in which we are supporting that leadership development. In addition, leaders look different. Not all leaders are equal, just as job title or role does not equate to leadership. The authors call for the field to reconsider how we emphasize the importance of leadership development to be a stronger focus on growth processes rather than emphasize and evaluate binary outcomes that centre around administrative and managerial tasks. Someone can be a strong leader without having the responsibility of supervising others or evaluating the performance of others. We, as a field, need to be growing leaders at all levels to build a sustainable and equitable system of services for young children with disabilities and their families.

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