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Recognizing and Supporting Early Childhood Educators and Program Administrators as Agents of Change: An Exploration of Distributed Leadership in Early Care and Education

High quality early care and education (ECE) supports the healthy development and learning of young children. Quality improvement is an important focus in ECE systems. Federal investments in quality improvement include more than \$1 billion of the Child Care and Development Fund and nearly \$240 million in Head Start Training and Technical Assistance each year.¹ Yet results of quality improvement efforts vary, and many fall short of delivering quality outcomes, which has prompted interest in identifying and implementing evidence-based approaches that support ECE programs in achieving and sustaining quality.

Implementing and sustaining quality depends on staff contributions and actions. Research from fields such as K–12 education, health, and management finds that quality improvement is more likely to occur and be sustained in the context of distributed leadership, in which administrators and frontline staff work together to affect change and improvement (Kirby et al., 2021). In distributed leadership, those in formal leadership roles and frontline staff share power and decision making in one or more domains of work.

The ECE literature suggests that distributed leadership is well aligned with many of the approaches applied in the field. The foundation for distributed leadership focuses on equity and inclusion, collaboration, social justice, shared power, and inclusivity in relationships among staff (Alanis et al., 2021; Dunlop, 2008; Douglass, 2017;

Nicholson et al., 2018). This mirrors the focus on relationships and their importance in supporting learning and development in the early childhood years (Alanis et al., 2021; Nicholson et al., 2018).

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Distributed leadership is when formal leaders and frontline staff share power and decision making in one or more domains of work. In the context of ECE, distributed leadership is defined as the combined efforts and influence of ECE administrators and teaching staff in leading change and quality improvement. ▲
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We are just beginning to understand and recognize the role of distributed leadership in ECE settings. Research on distributed leadership in ECE is broadening the view of leadership beyond just management functions to include leadership for change, improvement, and innovation (Douglass, 2017). Studies in the ECE and K–12 sectors have shown that teacher leadership might play a central role in fostering a culture of continuous quality improvement (CQI; Kirby et al., 2021). Yet little is known about how common and effective distributed leadership is in center-based ECE programs in the United States.

This brief intends to provide readers with an overview of the research on distributed leadership along with a concrete example of how ECE settings can achieve distributed leadership. Specifically, in this brief, we aim to (1) describe and elevate the concept of distributed leadership in center-based

ECE settings and its potential benefits, including its role in supporting quality improvement, and (2) provide a concrete example of distributed leadership development from a quality improvement initiative called the Culture of Continuous Learning (CCL) project. We conclude with thoughts about how to incorporate distributed leadership into existing professional development and quality improvement systems to better support ECE settings across the country.

A framework for distributed leadership in center-based settings

Across disciplines, distributed leadership extends beyond job title or formal position to encompass the behaviors or actions of a range of staff in contributing to leadership (Douglass, 2017; Dunlop, 2008). Through this lens, leadership is defined as participation in decision making, planning, or implementing change for improvement.

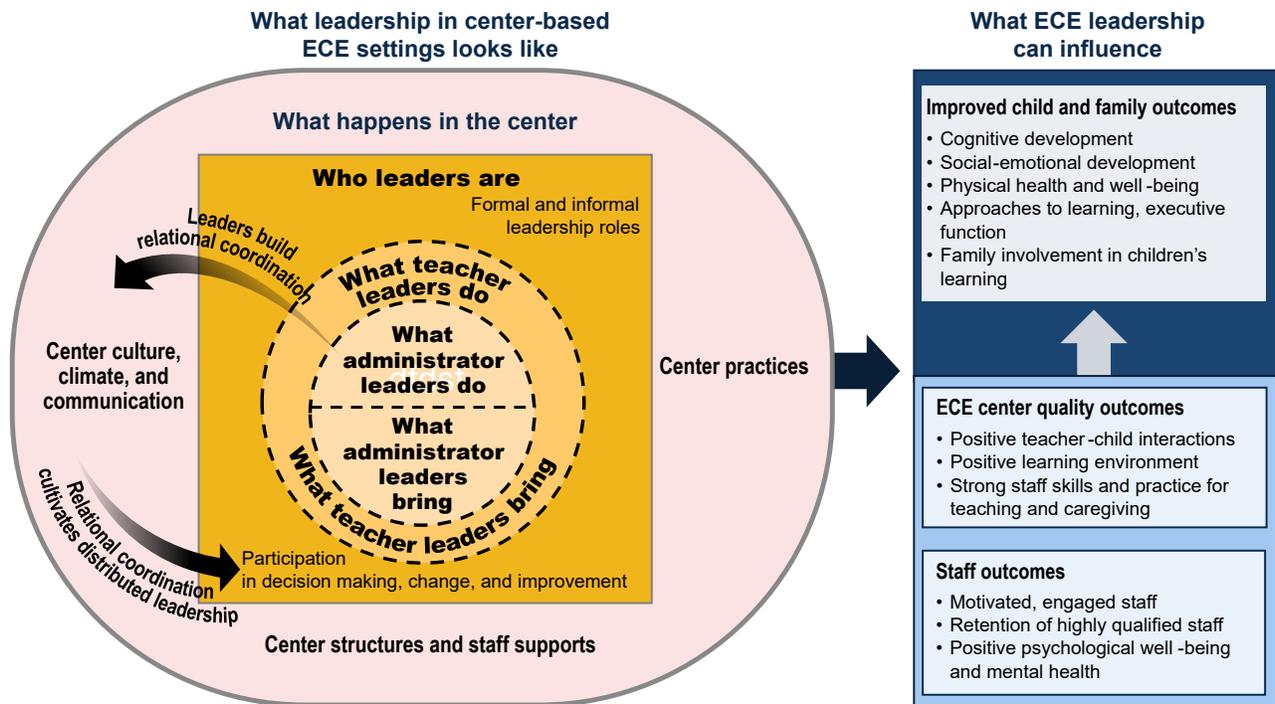
The Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS) is defining and measuring leadership in center-based ECE settings with this broad and inclusive view of leadership in mind. In the ExCELS project, we approach leadership as a construct comprising three elements: (1) who leaders are, based on who participates in decision making, leading for change, and quality improvement; (2) what leaders bring to leadership in their education, training, pedagogical knowledge, values, and beliefs; and (3) what leaders do to support children's learning and development, center operations, and strategic planning, and to build relationships and coordination among staff and with families (Kirby et al., 2021). These three elements of leadership are highly connected—what people bring can help them feel confident and comfortable in being a leader, and what leaders do can create a working environment that does, or does not, welcome more people into decision making and quality improvement activities. Leadership, defined in this way, can be broader than one leader, even while a strong center administrator might be essential to effectively managing center operations and creating an environment that engages a range of staff in leadership.

Why does distributed leadership matter for center quality?

Research suggests that distributed leadership can be a key driver of organizational change and improvement (Kirby et al., 2021). Distributed leadership, reflected in the ExCELS theory of change shown in Exhibit 1, is defined as the combined efforts and influence of administrators and teaching staff in leading change. It encompasses who leaders are, what leaders bring to their leadership in terms of knowledge and beliefs and attitudes, and what leaders do—their actions and behaviors, each of which is depicted in the yellow center of the theory of change. The leadership of administrators and teaching staff can influence quality (the blue boxes on the right side of the theory of change) through various potential pathways. For example, leadership can directly influence the center climate, workplace relationships, and communication among administrators, staff, and families. The ExCELS theory of change shows the dynamics between what leaders do (the yellow box) and the center culture and climate, as well as the quality of adult communication (the pink outer circle around the yellow box) (Kirby et al., 2021).

Distributed leadership might also influence classroom quality and child outcomes directly or indirectly through the combined efforts and influence of administrators and teaching staff. Administrative leaders might help create a positive center climate and communication that supports retention of highly qualified staff, teacher leadership, staff motivation, and staff well-being, and these might be associated with better quality and child outcomes. In this way, administrators might indirectly influence center quality outcomes. Teacher leaders might also have a direct or indirect influence on quality and child outcomes. Teaching staff might train, supervise, or support other teachers; lead family engagement activities; select and support implementation of the curriculum; and engage collaboratively with others in quality improvement and organization change efforts that influence organization culture and climate. In the following sections, we delve more deeply into prior findings showing how distributed leadership can lead to improved quality and child outcomes in ECE settings.

Exhibit 1. Excerpt of ExCELS theory of change of ECE leadership for quality improvement



Distributed leadership influences what happens in the center

Research indicates that administrators (for example center directors or site administrators) can play an important role as facilitative leaders who create the conditions in which distributed leadership might emerge, develop, and be sustained in ECE centers (Kirby et al., 2012).

The primary center administrator often sets the tone for interactions in a working environment. Administrators' actions—what they do—can be the active ingredient to encourage distributed leadership. They initiate and support relational coordination in their setting, meaning they help create shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and high-quality communication (Douglass, 2017). The positive interactions and relationships that come from relational coordination help distributed leadership continue to grow, expanding opportunities

Relational coordination is defined as shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and high-quality communication among administrators, teaching staff, and families. ▲

for multiple people to engage in organization change. (This is depicted by the black curved arrows on the left side of the theory of change.)

A positive culture cultivates distributed leadership by expanding who participates in decision making for change and improvement. By contributing to a workplace culture of learning and improvement, shared decision making, and positive and respectful relationships, administrators empower teachers to exercise the autonomy to solve problems and initiate or actively participate in improvement efforts (Dennis & O'Connor, 2012; Douglass, 2011; Sims et al., 2015). For example, with support

from administrators, teachers can grow in their leadership through roles within or beyond their classrooms as mentors or coaches, or by contributing to center-wide initiatives and a culture of continuous learning (Pacchiano et al., 2018; Wang & Ho, 2018). Distributed leadership can reflect equity and inclusion by recognizing the expertise of staff and their capacity for leadership, rather than concentrating leadership among those who hold traditional or formal leadership roles. Equity and inclusion in quality improvement and change processes involves including the voices and leadership of those closest to the practices that are the focus of the changes (Austin, 2014; Dunlop, 2008; Douglass, 2017; Douglass & Klerman, 2012; Leeson et al., 2012; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015).

Research suggests that distributed leadership exists on a continuum and requires buy-in of administrators and a set of supportive organization structures to be successful (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York & Duke, 2004). Distributed leadership might be less developed, and therefore less effective, when these structures and supports are not in place. Administrators can create the conditions that support teacher leadership, such as professional development for teacher leadership, clearly defined and formalized teacher leadership roles, and paid and protected planning time for teachers (Eskelinen & Hujala, 2015; Heikka & Hujala, 2015; Kangas et al., 2015; Sebastian et al., 2016).

Distributed leadership influences staff outcomes

Distributed leadership is associated with multiple positive staff outcomes. These positive outcomes include staff well-being, resilience, retention, empowerment, and engagement in quality improvement activities. Studies in ECE and many other sectors have found that the relational practices associated with distributed leadership contribute to staff well-being and resilience and might reduce staff burnout and turnover (Alilyyani et al., 2018; Cummings et al., 2010; Gardner et al., 2011; Gittel, 2016;

Montano et al., 2017; Whitebook et al., 2016). In addition, teachers feel empowered to use their expertise and experience to contribute to decision making and collaborate with others to drive change and improvement (Douglass et al., 2021a). This can ultimately strengthen staff engagement and commitment to making changes in their practices and the program.

Distributed leadership influences ECE center quality outcomes and child outcomes

Research suggests that distributed leadership might be associated with positive outcomes for teaching quality and children's development and learning (Kirby et al., 2021). One way distributed leadership can influence quality is by promoting a positive organization climate and a culture of learning and improvement (Kirby et al., 2021). Another key way in which distributed leadership can influence quality is through teacher leadership (Kirby et al., 2021). For example, an experimental study of a training and coaching initiative of preschool teachers in Chile found larger learning gains among children when teachers were also collaboratively engaged in leading a process of CQI alongside center leaders than when teachers were just recipients of the training and coaching (Arbour et al., 2016). Several studies in ECE centers in the United States have found an association between distributed leadership (for example, teacher involvement in decision making, relational leadership, teacher collaboration, or positive relationships among staff) and higher classroom quality as measured by Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) scores and other quantitative and qualitative measures (Ehrlich et al., 2018; Rohacek et al., 2010; Whitebook et al., 2016). A large body of research in other sectors such as business, health, and K–12 education have found that distributed leadership is associated with outcomes for children/students, patients, and clients (Gittel, 2016; Seashore et al., 2010).

Distributed leadership in action

Here, we provide a concrete example of how distributed leadership can be fostered through a quality improvement initiative in ECE settings, and how distributed leadership can support quality in short- and long-term outcomes. The Culture of Continuous Learning (CCL)² project tested an evidence-based methodology for quality improvement called the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC). The BSC methodology supports practice change by addressing the individual and organization factors that are associated with implementing and sustaining high quality practices. Distributed leadership is one of these key factors, acting as the driver of organization improvement (Pacchiano et al., 2016). Quality improvement methods such as the BSC equip teaching staff and center administrators to lead improvement in their centers, including increasing the use of evidence-based practices and improving organization processes and workplace climate (Douglass et al., 2021a).

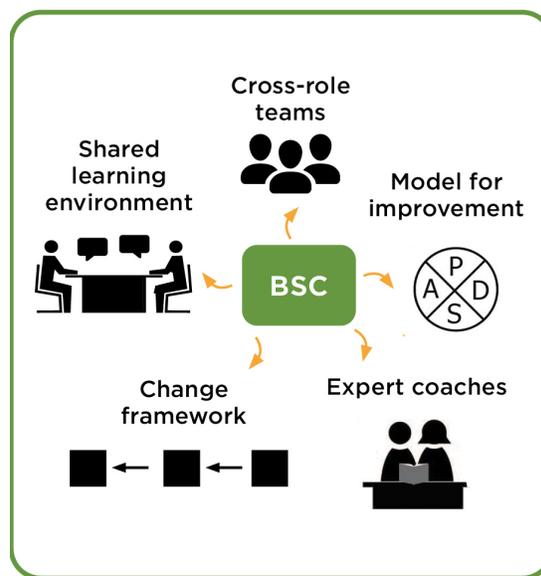
Next, we outline how centers participating in the CCL project implemented the BSC and the role distributed leadership played as a key mechanism for change in quality practices in this project.

How does a BSC work?

A BSC has five key elements, or active ingredients, that operate in a dynamic way to build leadership and organization capacity for CQI. One of these elements is creating *cross-role teams* within each participating center-based ECE setting. Center administrators, teachers, and parents make up these cross-role teams and work directly with a trained team of staff or consultants who serve as quality improvement and content experts and who lead the implementation of the BSC throughout a 12- to 18-month period. These *expert coaches* support teams on the use of CQI techniques and the content that is the focus of change (called the *change framework*). Members of the cross-role

teams come together in a *shared learning environment* (either in-person or virtually) throughout the 12- to 18-month period; that learning environment includes up to four day-long, full-team meetings; monthly role-specific group discussions; and online discussion forums. Through BSC activities, cross-role team members learn to establish goals for improvement, collect and reflect on data as they test changes in practice, and spread and sustain quality improvement techniques within and across their organizations. Identifying goals and the systematic and iterative testing of changes is called the *Model for Improvement*. Exhibit 2 shows these five elements—cross-role teams, expert coaches, a shared learning environment, change framework, and Model for Improvement—and other resources describe them in further detail (Douglass et al., 2019). Many CQI programs use one or two of these elements, and so one unique feature of the BSC is the integration of all five as the essential ingredients of this approach.

Exhibit 2. Strategy for how a Breakthrough Series Collaborative supports classroom quality



Source: Adapted excerpt from the CCL theory of change (Douglass et al., 2019).

Findings: How the BSC strengthened distributed leadership

The CCL project piloted the use of the BSC in ECE settings to test the feasibility of this quality improvement methodology. Seven ECE center-based programs in one northeastern, urban community participated in a BSC focused on supporting children's social and emotional learning for 18 months. Descriptive results shared in a report of the CCL project provide vivid examples of what distributed leadership looks like and how the BSC methodology helped cultivate that leadership (Halle et al., 2021). Quotes from interviews with the BSC staff, center administrators, and teachers who participated in the BSC process illustrate who engaged in leadership through the BSC process; what knowledge, mindsets, and attitudes they brought to their leadership; and what leaders did to lead quality improvement.

Who leaders are. The BSC methodology recognizes that a program's formal leader is critical for bringing about change in an organization's approach to quality improvement and leadership (Douglass et al., 2021a; Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2003). The BSC supports those in traditional leadership roles (that is, center directors or administrators) to foster the leadership of others and to enable teachers to identify strategies to improve classroom and center quality. A center administrator from the CCL project noted:

/ I saw myself as...the person who is responsible, making sure everyone is on the same page. Checking in with the team leader and making sure they're clear.

– Center administrator

The methodology also brings all stakeholders, including teachers, other program staff, and parents, into the circle of "who leaders are."³

It does this by enlisting the participation of cross-role teams from each participating ECE program; these teams usually include four to six administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents. Through the activities and structures of the BSC, teachers and parents can become agents of change within their ECE programs. For example, one administrator noted:

/ The way that the BSC really...does well is...getting as many people involved in it as possible.... There [are] small pieces that individuals can do, but then they're built to be really successful, and that really engages people and encourages them to do more because they see the immediate effects of making one small change.

– Center administrator

In the CCL project, the BSC coaches encouraged staff at varying levels to participate during all-team calls. By encouraging teachers to participate during calls, center administrators have the opportunity to learn from teachers. Center administrators come to appreciate the wisdom and leadership capacity of their staff. These interchanges foster equity and inclusion, and create an environment that cultivates mutual respect and trust, as well as a culture of collaborative learning and improvement, and thereby supports distributed leadership.

/ Some teachers [are] more hesitant to express opinions to directors in front of senior leaders.

– BSC coach

What leaders bring. Through intentional training and by modeling CQI practices, BSC staff, including quality improvement specialists and expert coaches, show BSC participants how to apply "what they know" to "what they do." Teaching staff make changes in their classrooms, try innovative techniques, and use data to determine if these changes and innovations lead to improvements. The BSC not only teaches quality improvement skills but also helps develop and reinforce a leadership mindset. Referring to one of the teachers on a team, a BSC staff member noted:

/ The project helped her to develop those skills and to acknowledge her leadership role and that she had something to share. Teachers need to have opportunities to...see themselves in a different light.

– BSC staff member

The BSC activities highlight that everyone is on a journey of continual improvement. This realization can change team members' attitudes and dispositions. In the case of center administrators, the BSC might spark a sense of humility. As one BSC staff member noted:

/ On the part of the directors, there needs to be like a humbleness there in knowing that they may not have all the answers.... I think if there is an openness to making those kinds of changes to make an environment more psychologically safe, then that's a good starting point for the BSC.

–BSC staff member

In the case of teachers and other center staff participating in a BSC, they might begin to feel safer taking risks, making mistakes or trying new things. This is especially true if the center leader is supportive rather than punitive about making mistakes. One administrator noted:

/ I involve myself in it [the BSC inquiry process] and tell them [the center staff] it's okay and to keep trying. The more you do it, the better it will come and it will flow.

– Center administrator

Through activities that engage team members across the collaborative, the BSC can strengthen participants' sense of self-efficacy and comradery. For example, one center administrator reported that the calls with other administrators made them feel important and useful to their peers:

/ Because your voice is being heard.... You'd be surprised when you hear different centers going through the same thing you're doing. And most of the time, you're really helping someone out when they hear your voice, and when you hear their voice, they're helping you out.

– Center administrator

The BSC activities can also foster a sense of professionalism and openness to sharing both challenges and successes. A BSC staff member reflected:

/ Being in a big room together for sometimes eight or six hours, I think people really developed a professional connection, for sure.... It was a community that felt very comfortable and trusting in sharing what works for them with each other and sharing their thoughts with each other.

– BSC staff member

What leaders do. Center administrators put structures and supports in place, or activated existing structures, to enable shared leadership for program improvement. For example, some center administrators used existing staff meetings to discuss improvements being tested in the center, or put new processes and procedures in place to support the full engagement of other staff members in the quality improvement work. Center leaders made sure staff coverage was in place so teachers could attend BSC workshops where they were designing strategies for change and using data to inform action. In short, center administrators often repurposed existing procedures and infrastructure to support staff participation in the BSC and, through this process, supported staff leadership development. As one center administrator explained:

/ What I have done...is just organize and make sure they [the teachers] have that time and space to do the work that needs to be done.

– Center administrator

In addition to developing or repurposing existing organization structures to support CQI, the BSC methodology also asks center administrators to change their own behavior by sharing responsibility for changing practices with classroom teachers and other center staff. As part of their participation in the BSC, center administrators agree to give authority to all staff to make decisions on their own about what changes they want to test in their classrooms or areas of influence. This empowers teachers to try new things and test whether a change leads to improvements in the outcomes of interest. As one center administrator concluded:

/ Empowering staff. That's what the Breakthrough Series does. It empowers staff to make small changes that bring about big changes.

– Center administrator

Through the BSC, teachers reflected on data, identified new teaching or program strategies to test, and supported other teachers to test new practices to drive improvement. Using their quality improvement knowledge and leadership mindset, teachers who participated directly in the BSC activities helped spread quality improvement techniques to their colleagues within the center. As one teacher described:

/ I was taking what we were learning in the infant/toddler classroom, and I was bringing it here [to the pre-K classroom] and try[ing] to implement with pre-K. We had one child in pre-K here...he was not very vocal or responsive at first. I worked with teachers, and we implemented strategies we had learned from the BSC; now he's one of the most talkative kids in the class, he's come out of his shell in such a big way. He's now very eager to say hello, good morning, how are you, to share his work, to interact with you on a higher level. It was very good to see a literal success story to come out of the work we were doing.

– Teacher

Perhaps the role of a BSC in fostering distributed leadership at all levels of an organization is best summed up by this reflection from a BSC staff member from the CCL project:

/ The hope of BSCs is that they empower folks who maybe aren't in leadership positions, like teachers, parents, those kinds of folks, to have more of a voice because they are the people doing the boots-on-the-ground work, and they are the people that are probably in the best position to name what actually needs to change in an organization, but so often their voices are not heard. So, I think when the BSC fosters safety for folks and enables them to share what's really going on for them, there can be the ability to make great change in an organization. And if employees feel heard, they are more likely to stay around...so I think the more folks feel valued in their organization, the more likely the center is to do better as a whole.

– BSC staff member

Implications of the research on distributed leadership for professional development and quality improvement

Early childhood professional development and quality improvement systems look different across states and localities, but all offer some form of training and technical assistance (T/TA) such as coaching, mentoring, consultation, and professional learning communities. Regardless of format, most existing T/TA systems identify leadership development as a priority (Douglass et al., 2021b). However, most leadership development efforts aim to engage those in formal leadership roles (that is, center administrators); the existing professional development frameworks do not necessarily focus on teachers or parents as leaders and, therefore, are likely not designed to support distributed leadership, and its associated positive outcomes, in ECE settings.

The BSC is a quality improvement methodology that engages leaders at all levels through an integrated combination of training, professional learning communities, and team coaching to equip teams to work and learn together on how to improve evidence-based practices. In addition, the BSC is a strategy that models leadership practices for center leaders and enables teachers and other stakeholders such as parents to engage in leadership roles (Tout et al., 2021). In this way, the BSC equips leaders at all levels with important leadership skills and helps them develop systems thinking (Douglass, 2017; Douglass et al., 2021a) to see how each person on the team (and in the broader organization) contributes to the success of the entire quality improvement effort.

Adopting the BSC methodology within a T/TA system can also strengthen equity and inclusion. By design, the BSC engages diverse voices and perspectives in cocreating and leading change and creating an inclusive culture of continuous learning. It values and elevates the expertise of those closest to the day-to-day practice with children and families. The BSC is also uniquely designed to support organizations to address persistent and seemingly intractable

challenges. It goes beyond training to engage people across roles to work collaboratively to achieve results. For example, BSCs have been used to improve racial equity in the child welfare, juvenile justice, health care, and ECE contexts.⁴

Incorporating the BSC methodology within professional development systems for delivering T/TA offers the opportunity to cultivate an inclusive and equitable view of leadership and systems thinking in ECE professional development systems and might lead to more effective professional development outcomes. The BSC methodology could augment improvement activities currently used within professional development or T/TA systems or could replace improvement activities within these systems. Adopting the BSC might require professional development systems to repurpose existing resources or structures, or re-envision how to better support distributed leadership in ECE settings. For example, the BSC requires specially trained or certified improvement advisors to lead the activities of the BSC (Agosti et al., 2021; Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2003). Current professional development systems might need to hire new staff or provide additional training to current coaches in order to implement the BSC methodology accurately and effectively.

The BSC is a structured, evidence-based method for quality improvement that might yield greater impact than approaches that lack an evidence base. It is important to note, however, that the BSC requires a resource and staff commitment for 12 to 18 months, and further rigorous evaluation of the use of BSC in early childhood settings and systems is needed to assess its impact on quality improvement and distributed leadership. Subsequent, planned phases of the CCL project will include evaluations of the BSC in diverse ECE settings and contexts and at scale within state quality improvement and professional development systems.

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Supporting distributed leadership in ECE settings:

- Consider adopting the BSC methodology within existing T/TA or PD systems
 - Measure and evaluate the use of distributed leadership and its influence on staff, center quality, family and child outcomes
 - Measure and evaluate the effectiveness of leadership development and quality improvement initiatives in ECE settings ▲
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Regardless of the quality improvement approach implemented in ECE settings, it is important to assess whether a change in leadership approach, and specifically the expansion of distributed leadership, truly leads to leadership development and quality improvement at the center level. To effectively implement these types of studies, the field needs a measure that can capture multiple dimensions of leadership across a range of center-based ECE settings. The ExCELS project offers the opportunity to develop and use such a measure and evaluate the effectiveness of leadership development or quality improvement initiatives in ECE settings. A new measure of leadership can help expand our understanding of the promise of distributed leadership to improve outcomes for the ECE workforce (for example, in promoting positive workplace climate) and for participating children and families (for example, in promoting quality services). Further research using a comprehensive measure of center leadership has the potential to yield important advances in our understanding of how to support ECE leadership at all levels. In addition, embedding promising quality improvement approaches that promote distributed leadership within early childhood professional development systems might increase the likelihood that quality improvement efforts in ECE settings will grow and last.

Endnotes

¹ See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/data/ccdf-expenditures-overview-fy-2018-all-appropriation-years> and <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2019>.

² See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/culture-continuous-learning-ccl-project-breakthrough-series-collaborative-improving>

³ By including parents in the constellation of “who leaders are,” the BSC methodology reflects an even broader and more inclusive definition of leadership in ECE settings than is presented in the ExCELS theory of change, which aims to capture the essential features of leadership among staff at all levels within ECE centers (Kirby et al., 2012).

⁴ https://files.nc.gov/ncelc/activity_13.1_wssu_cultural_competence.pdf

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About the Projects

The Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS) and the Culture of Continuous Learning (CCL) project are both funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families. The ExCELS project is working to fill the gaps in definitions and measurement to understand how effective leadership can improve the quality of experiences for children ages birth to five in center-based ECE settings. The project has produced [a literature review](#) describing what we know about the elements of leadership in ECE center-based settings and how leadership influences staff, center quality, and child outcomes. A descriptive study of 120 ECE centers in 2022 will test the theory of change and inform the development of a new measure of leadership. The CCL project aims to better understand how child care and Head Start programs can improve the quality of services received by young children and their families, and also how such quality improvement can be institutionalized and sustained to create a culture of ongoing quality improvement at the program level. Phase I of this project (2016–2021) designed and assessed the feasibility of implementing a specific approach to quality improvement, the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC), to promote the uptake and success of evidence-based practices around social and emotional learning (SEL) in both child care and Head Start settings. The project has produced [a literature review](#), a [report on Phase I findings](#), and numerous [research briefs](#). CCL Phase II (2021–2026) aims to explore whether it is possible to integrate the BSC into existing training and technical assistance or quality improvement systems in child care and Head Start to enhance, instead of duplicate, existing efforts within those systems.

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