A Model for Practitioner-Researcher Partnerships that Foster Professional Learning from Research Evidence in Early Childhood Education Settings

**Moderator: Kirsten Kainz**

Promising approaches to improving child outcomes in early childhood education focus on bolstering professional learning in the education setting, especially when supported by coaching around the use of data (for one example see: Duncan, Magnuson, & Murnane, 2016). Coaching around data use requires a local education infrastructure that: 1) facilitates meaningful data collection and analysis; 2) ensures effective coaching through specific staffing plans; and 3) allows for adequate time for discussion and sense-making around data.

In this panel session we will present the work of the Educare Learning Network (ELN), which is a partnership of early education practitioners, local researchers, and a national data management and analysis hub that serves as a backbone organization to support data use in local settings. The ELN consists of 22 early education schools across the country implementing the Educare model that enhances Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS) with additional quality components. One of the core quality components of Educare is a framework for data utilization that includes an explicit staffing plan and method for facilitating data use for quality improvement. More specifically, Educare practitioners (i.e., teachers, master teachers, directors) and local researchers partner to learn from data in continuous quality improvement cycles. For example, master teachers provide teachers with ongoing professional development and coaching on research-based best practices using results of standard classroom quality observations. At least three times a year, teachers use a curriculum-based progress monitoring tool to track children’s development, inform learning goals, and share results with parents. Annual classroom observations and language assessments are conducted by trained and reliable local evaluators and shared with teaching teams for continuous quality improvement. Family engagement is encouraged through a family support specialist, who conducts at least two home visits per year, and through two parent conferences per year in which teachers discuss the child’s progress with the parents.

The panel will be organized so that each panelist team can present a brief set of information that reveals what the ELN is learning about data use, professional learning, and program improvement. Specifically, three panelists teams will discuss research findings related to:

1. the design of the data use infrastructure and connections between the national hub and local education settings;
2. the role of data use for improving local classroom quality; and
3. the role of data use for improving local family engagement in dual-generation programs.

Then, the moderator will facilitate a discussion among audience members and panelists for the purpose of exploring next steps for data use within the ELN and the broader early childhood education community.

Purpose. The purpose of this segment of the panel is to present an overview of the Educare model and particularly its data use practices. The following questions will be considered: (1) how does the Educare Implementation Study data collection protocol support teacher professional learning and family engagement? (2) what types of teacher learning and family engagement improvement are targeted? And (3) how has the data collection and reporting evolved over the project period from 2005 to the present? Data will be drawn from the Implementation Study and the Educare Data Utilization Study conducted in 2014.

Setting. Data for the Implementation Study are gathered by local evaluation partners (LEPs) at the 22 Educare schools to support local improvement efforts. Most Educare schools are located in urban locations (one is rural, one is suburban). The data collected at the local schools are shared with researchers at the national hub to create a dataset that can be used to look across schools at implementation and outcomes and to answer broader questions for the early childhood education field.

Population. The children and families served by Educare reflected the types of families in American cities who qualify for EHS/HS (i.e., family income less than the federal poverty threshold). About half of the sample in the Implementation Study are girls (47%), and about 44% are African American, 36% Hispanic/Latino, 11% White/Non-Hispanic, and 10% Other. The cross-site dataset includes more than 10,000 children. Educare staff meet higher educational requirements than staff in typical HS programs. More than 90% of lead teachers have a B.A. or M.A. degree. They are supervised by master teachers, all with a B.A. and 76% with an M.A. degree.

Research Design. The Implementation Study is an observational study that includes parent interviews, staff surveys, classroom observations, and child assessments. The Data Utilization Study was a qualitative examination of the data use practices across schools and included focus groups with Educare staff conducted during site visits, telephone interviewers with members of the Implementation Assistance team, and emailed survey questions to local evaluators. We gathered data from 11 of the then-existing 19 operational schools during site visits and included “young,” “middle-aged,” and “mature” schools in the evaluation with the notion that there are lessons to be learned from all schools, particularly the newer ones, about the developmental process of data utilization.

Data Collection and Analysis. The Educare Implementation Study is a secondary analysis of data gathered at local sites. The Educare Data Utilization Study included key informant interviews in person or by phone, focus groups, and review of schools’ data-sharing documents. The questions covered all aspects of a school’s data collection and use, including data collected for the Implementation Study. Implementation Study data related to data utilization were summarized descriptively. All data from the Educare Data Utilization Study were analyzed using qualitative data analytic methods to identify key themes around data utilization. We looked for patterns in the data across schools that suggested facilitators of, or barriers to, implementing best-practice data utilization with
fidelity. We noted the practices that seemed most prevalent and could therefore be considered a hallmark of Educare. We also looked for examples of unique ways of collecting or using data that may be replicable at other Educare schools and could further enhance or distinguish this core component of Educare. Drafts were shared with schools to review, additions, or corrections.

Findings. Data from both the Educare Implementation Study and the Educare Data Utilization Study suggest that teacher professional learning is supported through the sharing of information on classroom quality (global, instructional support) and children’s outcomes. Teachers use child data to formulate individual instruction and develop lesson plans and education goals for children and the classroom. Teachers and teaching teams are observed in the classroom by LEPs and master teachers and then use those observational data for changes in practice and their own professional development. There is a particular focus on teacher learning related to the CLASS measure because it is used as a monitoring tool in Head Start. Schools do however attempt to go beyond a compliance mentality and have dialogues about data to understand implications and develop action plans for improvement.

Across schools, all family support staff collect and use some measures, but there is a less organized or coordinated plan for data use with individual family support than with the teaching teams. However, at the national model level, Educare leaders developed a new family engagement model, and researchers worked to align measures with the new framework to support learning about the model more broadly.

The data collection and reporting over the course of the Implementation Study have become more systematized across sites. In addition, more of the work has moved to online platforms to allow immediate download and faster use of data. Measures have changed over time as well, with the network constantly striving to obtain the best data for meeting the diverse information needs of its stakeholders.

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ELN Data Use for Improving Classroom Quality: Sandy Soliday Hong, Noreen Yazejian, and Maia Connors

Data Use and Continuous Quality Improvement in Educare Schools. State and federally funded systems designed to provide early care and education (ECE) services to children before school entry are currently building quality improvement activities into their program activities in order to ensure that children receive services that are of sufficiently high quality to improve their learning and development. One method by which ECE programs engage in quality improvement is through the use of data. Data collected on children’s learning and development and classroom quality is used to help identify areas of strengths and weaknesses that can be targeted for strengthening or improvement. This portion of the panel focuses on data use within the Educare Early Learning Network (ELN). The ELN is a group of federally funded Early Head Start and Head Start schools that provide wrap-around services that are funded through private partnerships to provide high quality ECE services to families with low-income.

How do teachers use data for the purpose of instructional improvement? Data use is an integral to the Educare model and is designed to facilitate ongoing quality improvement through feedback loops between a LEP and local Educare schools. There is some variability between schools in terms of how the data are shared back with master teachers, leader teachers, and teaching assistants within Educare programs, but generally the goals are for teaching staff to meet with the LEP and to: (1) use data to guide the development of the site’s overall plan for quality improvement, (2) set professional development goals for teachers, (3) monitor children’s progress, (4) identify goals for communication and partnerships with families, (5) help teachers to reflect on their teaching and learning supports, and (6) to establish classroom-level goals for continuous improvement.

What supports does Educare provide for using data? The Educare model facilitates the use of data through the following mechanisms: (1) leadership who are committed to quality improvement through data use and a culture of collaborative inquiry, (2) a commitment of time and resources dedicated to pursuing quality improvement based on areas of need identified through child and classroom data, (3) regular meetings where data are discussed and used to guide decision making, (4) targeted professional development for staff about data interpretation and use, and (5) collaborations with researchers committed to working with their individual site. Teachers and directors have reported that having a good relationship with their LEP, including, talking with them face-to-face, meeting regularly, and feeling that the LEP was responsive to their questions and concerns helped to increase how beneficial data use was viewed to be. Schools also felt that having clear, meaningful, and useful data reports and being able to share data resources across schools supported the utility of data use. Some challenges

What evidence do we have that teachers/staff are learning with data? Preliminary results from a study examining aspects of data use that are related to changes in classroom quality over time suggest that more frequent and intensive data use is associated with improvements in classroom quality over time. Preschool and toddler classrooms in 18 center-based ECE programs serving children from families with low-income ending in the 2015-16 school year were included in a study of data use and quality improvement. Schools participated in the Educare model between zero and seven years (m = 2.69 years). The average level of environmental and teaching quality...
across classrooms were in the moderate to high range over time. Most teachers reported that they use data weekly or monthly to guide their practice. The average quality across centers in the Educare Learning Network improved over time on the following process quality measures: ECERS-R and ITERS total scores, and the CLASS Pre-K Emotional Support, Classroom Organization and Instructional Support domains, and the CLASS Toddler Emotional and Behavioral Support and Engaged Support for Learning domains. When teachers reported engaging in more data use activities with a master teacher during a given school year, data use was associated with higher classroom quality scores for all measures except the CLASS Pre-K Emotional Support and Classroom Organization domains. A higher frequency of data use was associated with these two domains.

Where can we go in the future with professional learning using data? Some challenges that Educare schools faced in utilizing data to support continuous quality improvement were that there was not enough time to devote to thinking about data or how to best apply it their practice, a need for clear, meaningful and useable reports, and increased infrastructure to facilitate data use (e.g., regular meetings where data could be discussed and plans for how to apply findings from the data could be developed). These identified areas of need have begun to be addressed since data on strengths and challenges were collected in the 2014-15 school year, but staff turnover continues to make continuity in these efforts a challenge. Furthermore, more work is underway to examine the association between data use and child outcomes in order to help inform whether the frequency and focus of data use is related to improved outcomes for children.

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ELN Data Use for Improving Family Engagement: Shannon Guss, Diane Horm, Amanda Stein

Introduction. High quality early childhood programs work closely with families of the young children because families are children’s first teachers. Just as children receive responsive care based on their needs, the families of young children can benefit from differentiated services, resources, and supports. Children living in poverty have benefitted from their parent’s participation in intensive services focused on the parent-child relationship, home learning activities, parent-teacher partnerships, and children’s physical health (Bierman, Morris, & Abenavoli, 2017). Tailored family services can occur when data about needs and risks among families are examined and thoughtful responses implemented. Thus, early childhood programs’ efforts to support individualized services for children and families can be supported through data-informed responses that meet families’ specific needs.

The data use framework of 1) understanding, 2) knowledge, and 3) response can be used to organize recommendations about family data (Marsh & Farrell, 2015). The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) provided guidance on using program data to set priorities and track progress (2011). The center recommended that accurate and timely information be provided (NCPFCE, 2011). Systems that produce accurate and timely data are generate understanding of data. Beyond understanding, early care and education (ece) professionals must co-create meaning from the data in the context of their organization (Ford, Van Sickle, Clark, Fazio-Brunson, & Schween, 2017). This is best done within a trusting environment in which people feel safe to voice their interpretations and provide additional information for context in an effort to build new knowledge with practical applications (Ford et al., 2017; Marsh & Farrell, 2015).

The leadership of a school supports a culture of continuous quality improvement that shifts data out of the realm of knowledge and into action. This actionable knowledge will ideally stem from interpreting data that had a specific purpose based on mutually defined goals and agreed-upon ways to monitor success (NCPFCE, 2011). Agreed upon questions of import, with meaningful answers, create decision situations on which programs can make progress for the benefit of the children and families they serve (Donaldson, 2007). These decisions situations can help to plan long term goals, tell the story of the work being done, and support learning and improvement (NCPFCE, 2011).

Who uses family data? In Educare programs, School Directors and Family Advocates use data about families. Family Advocates, whose role is to understand and respond to the needs of Educare families, gather and use data at the individual level. In the same way that teachers create small groups or provide activities specific to a child’s development, Family Advocates create support groups, hold educational events, or provide resources specific to the needs of families on their caseload.

School Directors, or other administrators, use data at the school-level, aggregating data on multiple families to produce information necessary for building knowledge and taking action. For example, Program information Report (PIR) data provides numbers of homeless families and teen parents served. These numbers can be used to make tough decisions about the allocation of resources (NCOMFO, 2013a).
Work related to using data. In Educare, administrators using data at the aggregate level have led to initiatives that meet the needs of high risk families. As data has frequently shown that families struggled with food insecurity, Educare programs partnered with community food banks to increase access to healthy foods through mobile grocery stores, doubling money spent at farmer’s markets, and providing weekend back packs of food to children who were referred by their teacher or had needs identified in data. Similarly, schools with increasing numbers of foster children were supported by administrators who planned trauma-informed care workshops for teachers.

Data is also used at the individual level. In an internal qualitative study across Educare, Family Advocates reported collecting data systematically through family partnership agreements, health assessment, home visits, needs/strengths assessments, PIR data, depression screenings, Ages and Stages Questionnaires, attendance, and nutrition surveys. Due to the large amount of data collected, the Local Evaluation Partner (LEP) organizes some of this data into a dashboard for quick comparison across a classroom. These data support conversations with classroom teachers. During these conversations, teachers bring data on children’s learning and development, while Family Advocates bringing relevant data on the families of those children. These meetings might take the form of Family/Child Reviews required by Head Start or may be more in-depth data dives.

The process of understanding, building knowledge, and responding results in more informed planning and more focused work. At both the program- and individual-level, data-informed practices allow for the identification of open doors for intensive family engagement. Data can also provide information needed to support culturally competent practice when data on culture, tradition, child learning styles, and family interests are known (NCPFCE, 2011).

Evidence that data use matters for family services. Differences in data necessitate differences in the ways school leaders and family advocates respond to data. We draw on evidence from a qualitative study of data use in Educare schools, as well as reports from a single school, to demonstrate how data utilization supports families of young children. At the individual-level, multiple schools have protocols developed to follow up with parents who report depression or whose ratings of their child indicate child development risks. Systematic data collection supports comprehensive coverage of strengths and risks, with quick intervention as needed.

In addition to individual support, data supports school-wide efforts by providing evidence of the progress and effectiveness of those efforts. For example, certain schools implemented a strength-based approaches to family engagement and saw measurable change over time. Family surveys aligned to the objectives of the approach were designed and collected each Spring. The average score on the measure - assessing parents’ relationships with Educare staff - improved each year over the last 4 years, in conjunction with greater percentages of staff trained on the strengths-based approach. These are two examples of data use that can be shared – both at the individual and the school-wide level.

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