State-Level Collaborations and Children and Families

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Most collaborations are NOT:

- A single easily defined intervention
- An intervention with a single goal or single population to serve
- A program in a vacuum
- Easily evaluated with traditional study designs

Thus, attribution of causality is the biggest evaluation challenge
The Major Design Questions When Going to the Child Level

- Deciding what to study
  - Most prevalent, costly, or unique services
  - Exemplary or typical programs
- Deciding whom to study: all vs. some
- Design: longitudinal, cross-sectional
- Qualitative vs. quantitative
- Long-term vs. short-term
- Descriptive vs. some type of comparison group
- Can existing data be used
NC’s Smart Start Initiative

- NC’s early childhood initiative for children birth to 5 and their families
- Goal = to help all children enter school healthy and ready to learn
- A public–private partnership
- Providing high–quality child care, health care, and family services
- Local determination (with guiding principles)
- Variety of efforts varying by county, by year
Evaluation was driven by the theories of change underlying Smart Start

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Smart Start Services</th>
<th>Short Term Change</th>
<th>Long Term Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality child care efforts</td>
<td>Better child care</td>
<td>More &quot;ready&quot; children at age 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family programs</td>
<td>Better functioning families</td>
<td>More &quot;ready&quot; children at age 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health programs</td>
<td>More children taking advantage of greater number of health services</td>
<td>Children more healthy at school entry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning and collaboration support</td>
<td>More and different people involved in making decisions</td>
<td>Coord. service systems that strengthen families and children</td>
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</table>
Stages of Evaluating a Collaborative

- Describe the served people
  - Interview vs. survey vs. professional ratings
  - Normative national samples can be a good comparison
- Describe what they are getting
- Track cohort changes over time
- Study specific components in depth
- Gradually build the case for plausible causal connections
Quality of NC Preschool Child Care (Round 1 Counties)

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<tbody>
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<td>Low</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<td>High</td>
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Classroom Quality

% of Centers*

100 90 80 70 60 50 40 30 20 10 0

- 1994
- 1996
- 1999
- 2002
SS Participation & Quality

- No relationship between participation in SS-funded TA and classroom quality in a county’s first year of Smart Start
- Significant positive relationship at each later assessment (2, 5, 8 years)
- Stronger relationship over time.
- Current but not previous participation related to quality
## Significant Predictors of Children's Outcomes (N=512)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Outcome</th>
<th>Predictor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom Quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Receptive language</td>
<td>↑ ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book awareness</td>
<td>↑ ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book knowledge</td>
<td>↑ **</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story comprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>Applied math problems</td>
<td>↑ ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counting one-to-one</td>
<td>↑ ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
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<td>Problem behaviors</td>
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* *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001*
Plausible Causal Connections in Smart Start

- Center-based child care quality is improving.
- Many different quality improvement (QI) activities are being implemented.
- QI is related to participation in the activities.
- Children’s school readiness is related to their centers’ quality which is related to Smart Start participation.
- QI activities ~ quality improves over time and in relation to level of QI participation ~ quality ~ children’s school readiness
What Outcomes Can One Expect?

- Keep expectations reasonable
- One study will not answer all questions
- At early stages, program descriptions that speak to fidelity and can report outputs
- At all stages, descriptions of people
- After some years (??), more targeted outcomes
- Be aware of possible negative outcomes
Future Work

- Better data systems are needed
- Better data on “treatment as usual”
- More data on costs
- An accountability measurement system that uses data to improve services
Collaborative Network 1997–8