

The Culture of Continuous Learning Project: A Breakthrough Series Collaborative for Improving Child Care and Head Start Quality

# Theory of Change

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## Background

Making and sustaining quality improvements in early care and education (ECE) programs is a persistent challenge.<sup>1</sup> While state quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) successfully engage some programs and support progression in program quality levels, achieving sustained changes in practices that promote children’s social and emotional learning and improved language and cognitive skills is difficult.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Even when training, coursework, and coaching are directed at specific teaching practices, it is challenging for practitioners to apply new knowledge in their daily work. Contextual factors such as staff turnover, staffing shortages, and organizational structures that are not aligned with best practices (e.g., lack of paid planning time, few opportunities for reflective practice, ineffective or nonexistent organizational policies) are frequently observed in ECE programs.<sup>5,6</sup> Policymakers and practitioners are seeking new strategies to support improvement that can be tailored for and tested in the unique context of ECE settings.

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (OPRE/ACF/HHS) funded the Culture of Continuous Learning (CCL) Project to address this critical need in the field. The CCL Project is testing the feasibility of implementing a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) in child care and Head Start programs that serve children from diverse income and racial/ethnic backgrounds. The BSC is a structured method for promoting continuous quality improvement and supporting effective implementation of evidence-based practices in organizations.<sup>7</sup> The method is designed to overcome common barriers to change and improvement, and to tap into leadership at multiple levels of an organization to make improvement and implementation efforts more effective and sustainable. Furthermore, the BSC connects teams across organizations; this collaborative approach can accelerate improvement by creating peer learning networks and a context for mutual sharing. The BSC teaches participants the science behind improvement and implementation, with concrete tools, metrics, and process supports.<sup>8</sup> It promotes organizational capacity to test and implement improvements and engages staff across roles and levels.<sup>9</sup> The BSC methodology was developed in the health care field and has been translated successfully in other industries<sup>10</sup> but, to date, is not extensively used in ECE settings.

The CCL Project selected social and emotional learning (SEL) practices as the focus of the BSC. This topic is relevant to practitioners and families and is an area in which practitioners have reported challenges in applying knowledge to practice; moreover, changes in SEL practices can support meaningful changes in children’s development. While SEL practices are the focus of this quality improvement initiative in ECE settings, the BSC methodology also addresses the organizational factors that facilitate sustained changes in practice. The CCL Project aims to determine whether the BSC method of continuous quality improvement could be successful in achieving improved practices to support children’s social and emotional development when implemented within different types of ECE programs.

## Purpose of this Issue Brief

This issue brief presents the theory of change developed for the Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Social and Emotional Learning (BSC-SEL) that was designed and implemented as part of the CCL Project. A theory of change is a powerful tool that helps explain how and why a complex intervention is expected to bring about a desired change.<sup>11</sup> An intervention’s theory of change is often depicted visually, showing the possible causal linkages between activities, outcomes, and impacts. But a theory of change does more than show causal pathways: It also articulates how to achieve each step in the hypothesized pathways.<sup>12</sup>

The theory of change for the BSC-SEL serves two important purposes. First, it is a foundation for the design of the feasibility study for the CCL Project. Articulating the outputs, mechanisms, and outcomes of the BSC-SEL is important for developing research questions and measurement approaches for the study and ensuring that the study design captures key concepts and hypothesized pathways of action. Second, the theory of change can spark dialogue among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners about the BSC and how it compares to other quality improvement approaches. The theory of change promotes a critical analysis about how and why the BSC-SEL is hypothesized to result in sustained change.

The theory of change for the BSC-SEL is presented in a visual format and preceded by a narrative that frames the problem to be addressed. It explains why the BSC-SEL was selected as a solution to that problem and then describes how change is expected to occur according to these components of a theory of change: *strategy, outputs, mechanisms, short-term outcomes, long-term outcomes, and impacts*.<sup>13</sup>

Following our statement of the problem, we provide a brief description of each component within the theory of change, including the mechanisms that facilitate movement through the causal pathways from the BSC strategy to outputs, to outcomes, and finally to desired impacts.

## Problem Statement for the Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Social and Emotional Learning (BSC-SEL)

Research suggests that the most common approaches to quality improvement and professional development often do not result in sustained quality improvements in early care and education (ECE) programs. One reason is that early educators and administrators often face organizational and systemic barriers to translating new knowledge and skills into their practice in sustainable ways.<sup>14,15,16</sup> Another reason is that improvement efforts often fail to engage teachers as leaders and drivers of improvement; research suggests that this can undermine efforts to effectively make and sustain change in organizations.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, we know that evidence-based practices and interventions do not always work in exactly the same way with all children and families. As a result, teachers often must adapt practices to achieve the desired outcomes for all children.

Quality improvement interventions may be more successful in achieving their intended impact if they equip program staff and administrators with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets for testing and implementing effective adaptations of curricula, instruction, and family engagement practices.<sup>18</sup> The BSC methodology offers a solution to these challenges. The BSC is designed to create a culture of continuous learning in the context of a focused content area or domain of practice. One important focus for improvement in ECE programs is supporting social and emotional learning (SEL) and reducing challenging behaviors. While many ECE professionals have received training in SEL such as the *Pyramid Model for Promoting Young Children’s Social-Emotional Competence*,<sup>19,20</sup> there remains a gap between knowledge and practice.<sup>21,22,23</sup> The BSC-SEL seeks to build capacity for improvement in SEL practices in child care and Head Start programs to achieve the following three goals:

1. Increase the number of classrooms that show improvement in providing high-quality SEL environments.
2. Increase children’s social and emotional competence.
3. Reduce challenging behaviors.

These three goals represent the ultimate desired impacts of the BSC-SEL. The CCL Project is testing whether the BSC methodology can increase child care and Head Start programs’ capacity to systematically support and sustain improvements in SEL practices that advance these aims.

## Strategy

The BSC methodology is the strategy adopted for the CCL project. The BSC consists of five interdependent elements that enable organizations to achieve and sustain quality improvement: (1) a plan for improvement called the Change Framework; (2) teams from each program that create a shared peer learning environment; (3) cross-role teams from each program that include teachers, administrators, and parents; (4) a set of continuous quality improvement protocols called the Model for Improvement; and (5) supports provided by expert coaches referred to as the BSC faculty. Each of these elements is described in [Culture of Continuous Learning Project: A literature review of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative](#).<sup>24</sup>

The foundation for the BSC is the first element—the Change Framework. This framework serves as the content that anchors all the work done by teams in the Collaborative. The Change Framework is based in the research evidence and identifies the primary “drivers” for improving the three goals.<sup>25,26,27</sup> It lists the structures, processes, practices, and norms required for social and emotional learning practices to be adopted by participating centers and to achieve the overarching aims. The primary drivers in this BSC are 1) nurturing, responsive, and supportive relationships and environments; 2) teaching of social skills and emotional competencies; 3) family partnership; 4) racial equity and cultural responsiveness; and 5) organizational capacity and support for adopting SEL practices.

The four other BSC elements support participating teams to make improvements in the context of the Change Framework. These five BSC elements provide the infrastructure and processes that enable the development of a shared goal and purpose for the collaborative focused on SEL practices; a shared set of metrics for monitoring progress; support from project staff and faculty; opportunities for peer learning, empowerment, and leadership from within all levels of the organization including teachers, administrators, and parents; and a set of concrete tools and strategies for designing and testing changes to learn how to improve quality and make progress toward the intended impact.

## Outputs

When this BSC-SEL strategy is implemented effectively, the result is a series of outputs. The first level of these outputs includes the primary activities and products of the BSC process (e.g., the learning sessions and monthly metrics, action periods that include collaborative monthly calls and informal communications between teams, as well as the testing of small changes using Plan, Do, Study, Act

[PDSA] cycles and consultations with teams). These BSC activities produce a second level of outputs: a set of new structures and work processes within and among the ECE programs. For example, the BSC provides a structure for a set of meetings (cross-role team meetings, learning sessions, collaborative monthly calls, affinity group calls). These structures foster new routines for collaborative professional learning, building relationships, and improving communication. The BSC activities also produce a set of new work process approaches. For example, the BSC teaches participants how to change practices by using tools to collect and use data to inform tests of change and improvement. These tools include logs for recording and tracking small tests of changes, and a data reporting form to track monthly progress measures. These new work processes enable participants to begin developing and testing changes in their practices immediately.<sup>28,29</sup>

## Mechanisms

The mechanisms are the next part of the theory of change. Mechanisms specify how the outputs (the BSC activities and the new structures and work processes) activate changes that result in achieving the short-term and long-term outcomes. The mechanisms explain how we get from these outputs to the outcomes. In this theory of change, the mechanisms are drawn from current theory and research about organizational change and improvement. The CCL Project hypothesizes three types of mechanisms that are responsible for progressing toward the short- and long-term outcomes:

- Shifts in the relational dynamics within organizations
- Shift in the relational dynamics among organizations
- Shifts in participants' mindsets about making and leading change

The first mechanism involves the relational dynamics *within* the participating teams and their organizations. There is a shift in *psychological safety* as people begin to feel more safety around sharing their opinions, voicing new or different ideas, testing changes on their own, sharing data, learning from both successes and failures, and learning from one another. Research in the field of management has identified psychological safety as a critical factor in organizational learning, innovation, and improvement.<sup>30,31</sup> Team members experience an increase in self-efficacy and become empowered to generate ideas and test changes. In addition, power dynamics among participants shift, so that the expertise of both frontline staff and parents is as respected and valued as the perspective of administrators.<sup>32</sup> This creates a parallel process, in which relationships across the organization and its various roles are characterized by mutual respect. These relational shifts promote intra-organizational learning as the fuel for continuous improvement. Research on organizational learning and improvement emphasizes the importance of a learning culture, positive relationships, high-quality communication, and psychological safety—all of which appear to influence individuals to speak up, to be heard, and to take risks when it comes to testing changes.<sup>33,34,35,36,37,38</sup>

The second mechanism is a shift in relational dynamics among organizations as participants hear from other organizations and learn from their mistakes and successes. A unique feature of the BSC is the collaborative learning that it facilitates among the teams from different organizations. This learning can accelerate improvement by exposing participants to new ideas they may not have considered, and by providing opportunities for participants to learn from the successes and failures of other organizations. Research suggests that this *vicarious learning* may accelerate the process of improvement.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the third mechanism is the adoption of an inquiry mindset. This may reflect a shift away from a one-size-fits-all mindset, where the focus is more on compliance, fidelity, and using the same practice with every child or family. With an inquiry mindset, participants approach their problems of practice with curiosity and a desire to test possible solutions and strategies to learn what works and what may not work.<sup>40,41,42</sup> In the BSC, people come to learn how data make problems more visible and help them to gain insights into their ideas about adapting practices to achieve positive outcomes. Using data in their everyday practice helps BSC participants know whether their ideas and tests for improving

practices are heading in the right direction, so that they can be effective with all the children and families they serve.<sup>43,44,45</sup>

## Short-Term Outcomes

The BSC-SEL mechanisms activate individual and collective learning and improvement, resulting in short-term outcomes. These outcomes align with the Change Framework's primary drivers, and include:

- Increased knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes related to:
  - Social and emotional learning, family engagement, and racial equity and cultural competence (i.e., the drivers for the SEL aims of this BSC<sup>46</sup>)
  - Making and sustaining improvements in quality (e.g., collection and use of data to inform change, PDSAs, cross-role team meetings, and spreading improvement throughout the organization)
- Improved organizational climate and culture
- Stronger leadership at all levels
- Increased individual and collective efficacy

## Long-Term Outcomes

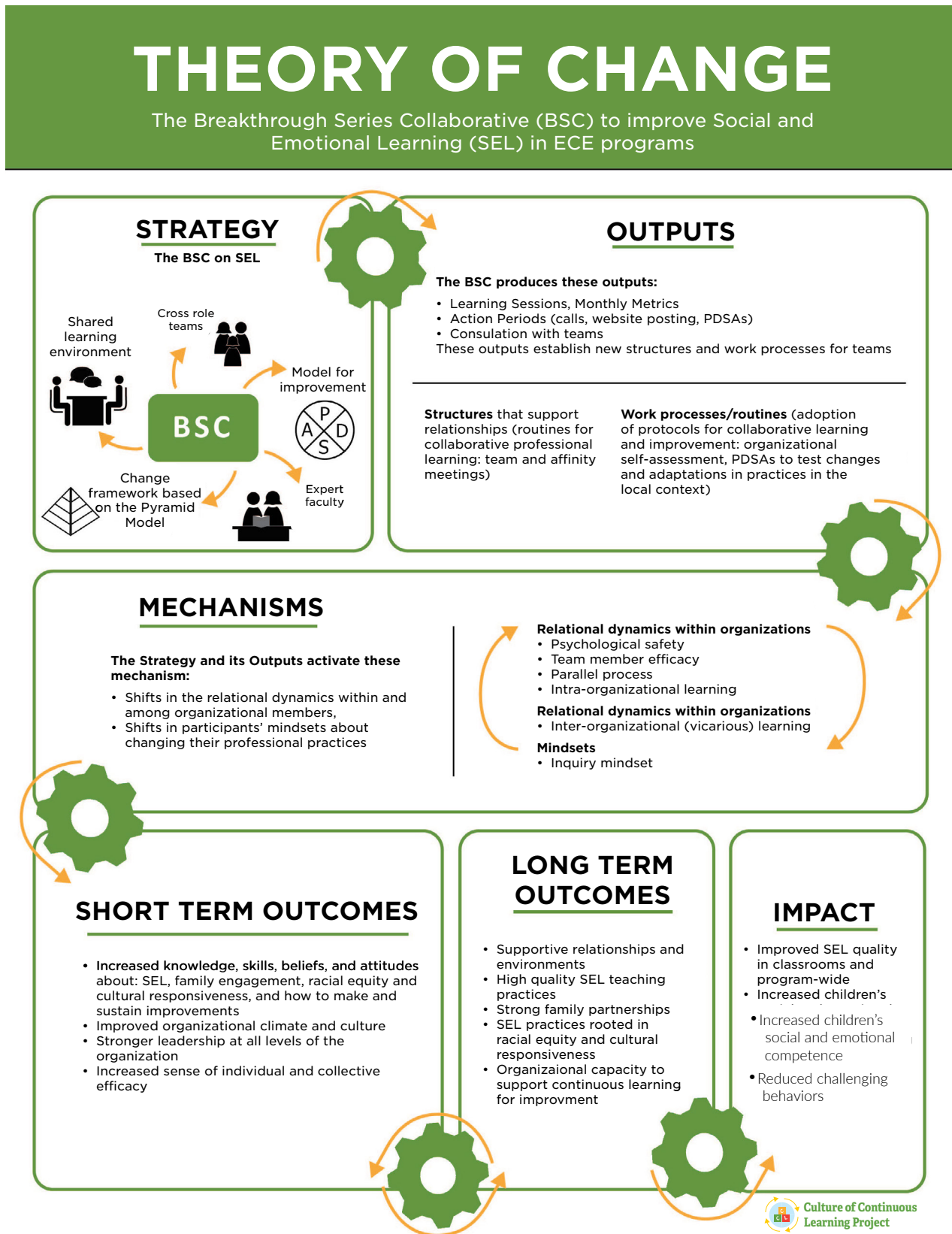
The long-term outcomes reflect those factors that must be in place (or strengthened) for the BSC-SEL to achieve its desired impact. The long-term outcomes are the primary drivers of the desired impact and form the foundation of the CCL project's Change Framework. These outcomes are positive and nurturing relationships and environments, growth in children's social skills and emotional competencies, strong family partnerships, racial equity and cultural responsiveness, and organizational capacity to continuously improve and sustain quality in SEL practices.

## Impact

As previously stated, the ultimate desired impact of this BSC is to achieve the following three goals:

- Increase the number of classrooms that show improvement in providing high-quality SEL environments.
- Increase children's social and emotional competence.
- Reduce challenging behaviors.

Figure 1. Theory of Change



# Considerations

## Informing the feasibility study

As noted at the beginning of this issue brief, a theory of change can be an important tool to articulate causal pathways toward desired outcomes. The hypothesized causal pathways for the BSC-SEL have informed the design of the feasibility study. The study aims to systematically assess the feasibility of implementing a BSC within ECE settings. Using a case study design, the data collection and analysis will focus on the facilitators and barriers encountered by ECE settings when trying to make individual and organizational changes in SEL practices; the study will also focus on the outputs and mechanisms within the theory of change that are useful for understanding whether and how these are shaped by participation in the BSC-SEL.

Feasibility study measures have been selected to capture each component of the theory of change, from strategy through short-term outcomes.<sup>a</sup> For example, the study includes measures of organizational climate, psychological safety, and self-efficacy obtained from participants in the BSC-SEL both early and later in the implementation of the BSC-SEL. Outputs of the BSC-SEL—such as documentation of attendance at and content of learning sessions and affinity group meetings, or number and type of PDSAs completed by participating BSC team members—will contribute to the feasibility study team’s assessment of whether and how ECE programs have changed their structures and work processes over the course of their participation in the BSC-SEL. Furthermore, observations of the learning sessions can provide insight into the relational dynamics both within and across organizations, and how those may change over the course of an organization’s participation in a BSC. Key informant interviews and focus groups provide additional qualitative information on the facilitators and barriers to the BSC approach to quality improvement for ECE professionals. Finally, classroom observations conducted by observers both before and after the implementation of the BSC-SEL will provide an objective assessment of whether changes in practices associated with support for social and emotional learning are detected in classrooms of teachers who were direct participants in the collaborative teams; the observational measure can therefore be used as an indicator of increased knowledge and skill among participating teachers. Observations in classrooms of teachers who did not directly participate in the collaborative teams will also be obtained and will contribute to an analysis of “spread” in quality improvement practices over time. Observers will not know which classroom teachers participated in the collaborative teams.

## Sparking dialogue and comparison with other quality improvement strategies

The BSC-SEL theory of change depicts a new approach to supporting practice change in ECE settings, calling out features of the workplace and organizational culture that are not the focus of quality improvement strategies used most frequently in state and local systems. Typically, models of quality improvement in ECE are aimed either at individual teachers/teaching teams to address specific practices (technical challenges), or they focus on leadership challenges and issues encountered by the director, but they do not encompass both practices and leadership (work by Pacchiano and colleagues is a notable exception).<sup>47</sup> The mechanisms outlined in the theory of change implicate a different process that focuses on the organizational culture and climate in which practice change happens. It describes psychological safety, self-efficacy, and changes in relational dynamics that are activated by the outputs of the BSC-SEL—new routines for collaborative professional learning that have the potential to accelerate improvements, strengthen relationships, and improve communication.

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<sup>a</sup> The time frame for the CCL Project permits only short-term outcomes of the BSC-SEL to be assessed within this initial feasibility study. Future studies of the BSC-SEL model may permit assessment of long-term outcomes and impact.



## Conclusion

The BSC methodology and hypothesized mechanisms for promoting change are relatively new to the early care and education field. This issue brief seeks to share the underlying theory of change for this innovative quality improvement approach, and to consider how it can be used within ECE settings to improve individual and organizational knowledge and practice around supporting social and emotional learning for young children. The CCL Project team anticipates and welcomes questions and dialogue from the field about the theory of change and details of the BSC-SEL. This issue brief can support these conversations and further comparisons of the BSC to existing models and methods of quality improvement in ECE.

### **The Culture of Continuous Learning (CCL) Project: A Breakthrough Series Collaborative for Improving Child Care and Head Start Quality**

The CCL Project is being conducted by Child Trends, the University of Massachusetts-Boston, JRA Consulting Ltd., and the Center for the Study of Social Policy. It is funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The purpose of the project is to assess the feasibility of implementing a Breakthrough Series Collaborative to support social and emotional learning in child care and Head Start programs.

Project publications provide further information and context that supplement the content of this issue brief. The [project overview](#) provides an outline of the project purpose, structure, and timeline. The [literature review](#) includes a description of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) methodology, improvement science, and a synthesis of empirical findings on BSC outputs and outcomes.

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