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# Playing well with others: a case study of collective impact in the early care and education policy arena

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## Abstract

The quality and quantity of early childhood care and education services have risen as a key reform area for influencing educational and economic outcomes. However, changes in this policy arena are stymied by the fragmentation of this policy arena. Collaborative approaches have been proposed to create systems-level change. Collective impact is one such approach; however, few examples exist in the early childhood care and education literature, especially at the state level. This ethnographic case study conceptualizes collective impact as a policy network capable of change in a fractured policy arena and reports the results from the first year of a statewide collective impact effort examines stakeholder perceptions of mobilization and development of a common agenda, or shared understandings. The results illustrate the importance of relationship building, ongoing attention to common understandings through multiple processes and mechanisms, the importance of the backbone organization, and the need to attend to mindset shifts that accompany early collective impact work.

**Keywords:** Collective impact, Collaboration, Early care, Education workforce

## Background

Increasingly, the early childhood care and education policy arena have been subjected to reform efforts as key areas for improving educational, economic, and other outcomes. These efforts include increasing the number of children served, including younger children in these settings, and raising program quality (Kalicki et al. 2017). A knowledgeable and supported early childhood care and education workforce have been identified as a pillar of high-performing systems across the globe (Kagan 2019). Likewise, in the United States, the early childhood care and education workforce has been identified as a leverage point for meeting the goals of access and quality. However, acting on this leverage point by increasing the training and support for the early childhood workforce is complicated by the mixed delivery system in the United States. The early childhood workforce works in a variety of settings, including home child care, child care centers, private preschools, Head Start and Early Start programs, and public schools, which exist within different federal and state funding streams and regulatory frameworks. Early childhood care and education providers are regulated by different state and federal agencies,

depending on the setting in which they work, each with their own criteria for licensure and accreditation (Buettner and Andrews 2009). The fractured nature of the early childhood care and education policy arena makes widespread improvement difficult, as policies and practices in the field are diverse, inconsistent, and at times, contradictory. For example, professional standards such as pre-service and in-service training and licensure criteria vary by setting, location, and funding streams (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2015).

The mixed delivery model of early childhood care and education reflects the increased sectorization and functional differentiation of modern democracies during the twentieth century. Despite this, actors and agencies in any given policy arena share interdependencies (Kenis and Schneider 1991). In recognition of this interdependency, a report by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015) identified the need to create a unified approach to workforce development for those that work with children birth to age 8, regardless of setting. Such unified approaches recognize that in order to meet demands for improving outcomes, such as third-grade literacy, changes must occur at multiple levels. Sustainable changes in the early care and education system require collaborative approaches to addressing issues such as workforce training and compensation, which cannot be addressed individually due to the interdependency of certification requirements and wages. Collaborative, systems-level approaches acknowledge this interdependency in order to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of early care and education services in a jurisdiction (Kagan 2019; Kagan and Roth 2017; Kagan et al. 2012).

In addition to the fractured nature of the early childhood care and education policy arena, progress is hindered by challenges in translating research into policies (Kalicki et al. 2017; Schweinhart 2016). Schweinhart (2016) reports policy actors exhibit a range of knowledge of early childhood research, but he suggests that few understand that only high-quality early childhood care and education programs result in robust returns on investment, such as those documented by economist James Heckman (e.g., Heckman et al. 2013). Schweinhart (2016) also noted that few policy actors recognize that funding compromises in the development of high-quality programs lead to less robust outcomes for children and return on investments. Despite efforts to disseminate this knowledge, including the role of early childhood care and education in program quality, limited funding is being allocated to the factors that increase quality (Schweinhart 2016). This raises questions about how policymakers and the public learn about the need for high-quality early childhood care and education and what factors contribute to quality, as well as how individuals then act on that information to influence policy creation. Questions of how shared understandings among policy actors are developed are of particular importance as shared understandings drive action that leads to systems-level changes (Kania and Kramer 2011; Stone et al. 2001).

### **Policy networks**

In order to achieve systems-level improvements in the workforce, along with the four other pillars identified by Kagan (2019)—a strong policy foundation; comprehensive services, funding, and governance; informed, individualized, and continuous pedagogy; and data-informed continuous improvement—simultaneous changes must be made at

the policy level and the agency regulatory level. Policy networks represent one pathway for actors to influence such changes through collective action (Carlsson 2000). The term policy network describes non-hierarchical relationships between public and private sector actors with mutual interdependence and a shared interest in policy. Within these networks, actors exchange resources, information, knowledge, and trust to work cooperatively to reach shared goals (Börzel 1998; Kenis and Schneider 1991). Rhodes (1990) views policy networks as occupying a meso-level, working between various actors and the state.

Traditionally, a narrow membership has been a hallmark of policy networks within a given arena (Rhodes and Marsh 1992). However, the high level of interdependency and need for simultaneous changes (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2015; Kagan 2019) suggests the need for deliberate effort to build a policy network capable of acting at a variety of levels and within a variety of agencies. Such a broad membership creates challenges for the need to build trust to support the interactive exchanges that create social capital, commitment, and community support for policy decisions, implementation, and evaluation (DeLeon and Varda 2009). Skilled facilitation has been identified as an important approach for public policy development (Cooper et al. 2006) as it supports bringing together disparate ways of knowing to influence a particular decision (Quick and Feldman 2011).

The need for a deliberate mobilization of a broad range of stakeholders, along with the need for shared understandings, described above, suggests collective impact as a framework to develop a policy network capable of implementing change in the early care and education system. The next section describes the framework of collective impact, followed by a description of the specific collective impact effort this study examines.

### Collective impact

Collective impact has gained significant attention in recent years as a strategy for deeper, more impactful collaboration and was among the recommendations of the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council's 2015 report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. This report argues that collaborative approaches are necessary to generate widespread changes in the recruitment, pre-service training, and in-service development of those who work with children birth to age 8. This study examines the first year of a statewide collective impact effort, Early Childhood Workforce Council (Workforce Council), aimed at creating systems-level change in early care and education. The next section provides an overview of the collective impact model, first described by Kania and Kramer (2011) in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, which influenced the design and execution of the Workforce Council.

Kania and Kramer (2011) introduced collective impact as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (p. 36). In their research on successful large-scale social change initiatives, Kania and Kramer (2011) identified cross-sector coordination and collaboration as creating systems change, as opposed to the isolated intervention of individual organizations. By bringing together stakeholders from across sectors to work on a common agenda through cascading levels of collaboration (Kania and Kramer 2011), collective

impact seeks to overcome the fractured nature of policy and governance to create systems-level change. Kania and Kramer's (2011) work on collective impact suggests that successful initiatives exhibit five conditions: a backbone organization, a common agenda, continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, and a shared measurement system (Kania and Kramer 2011). These five conditions are interrelated and asynchronous such that each may be introduced as appropriate (Sagrestano et al. 2018). Additionally, Kania et al. (2014) suggest that these conditions are necessary but insufficient without several important mindset shifts on the part of members. Each of these is more fully described below.

### ***Common agenda***

The *common agenda* of any collective impact initiative refers to having a shared vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem. A collective impact approach requires that differences in the definitions of the problem and the ultimate goal be discussed and resolved by diverse members (Kania and Kramer 2011).

### ***Shared measurement system***

Developing a *shared measurement system* has been described as one of the most challenging aspects of launching a collective impact initiative (Sagrestano et al. 2018) yet it is essential to keeping efforts aligned (Kania and Kramer 2011). Having a common set of indicators that monitor performance, track progress, and identify what works and what does not is critical to enabling collaborators to hold each other accountable and learn from each other's successes and failures.

### ***Mutually reinforcing activities***

*Mutually reinforcing activities* refer to the intentionality with which collaborators are asked to undertake activities that reflect their own strengths (Kania and Kramer 2011; Sagrestano et al. 2018). All participants are asked to contribute, not by doing the same activities, but by engaging in activities that support and coordinate with the activities of other collaborators with a mutual goal in mind.

### ***Continuous communication***

Establishing a true common agenda will occur only through a process of *continuous communication* where participants are provided opportunities to develop trust with one another, trust in the group as a whole, and are able to see that their own interests will be treated fairly. Beyond regular meetings over a sustained timeframe (Sagrestano et al. 2018) that are supported by an external facilitator using a structured meeting agenda (Kania and Kramer 2011), continuous communication is enhanced through interim updates provided by the backbone organization as well as strategically timed outreach to keep the shared vision in the purview of collaborators.

### ***Backbone organization***

Building a collective impact initiative necessitates a centralized infrastructure, referred to as a *backbone organization*. Kania and Kramer (2011) posit that a lack of supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons collaborations fail, acknowledging

the need for a dedicated staff that is separate from the participating organizations who facilitate all aspects of planning, managing, and supporting the collaborative initiative. The existence of a backbone organization with dedicated staff who supports the initiative sets collective impact apart from previous cross-sector collaboration (Turner et al. 2012).

### ***Essential mindset shifts***

Subsequent research on collective impact proposes that the five conditions described above are necessary but insufficient without essential mindset shifts (Kania et al. 2014). In order to achieve large-scale change, collaborators must shift their mindsets around who is involved, how they work together, and how progress happens. Kania et al. (2014) highlight the benefits of collaboration among partners with radically different perspectives and stress that the power of relationships must not be underestimated nor the time that must be invested in building strong interpersonal relationships of trust. Because solutions to complex problems are not known at the outset, successful collaborators recognize that change comes from enabling “collective seeing” rather than following a linear plan and that partners must engage in continuous learning and adaptation. And finally, collaborators must recognize that success comes from the combination of many coordinated activities and that contributing toward a common agenda rather than seeking evidence of attributable credit to a single organization can be far more powerful than taking credit individually.

### **Collective impact as a statewide policy network**

Following the recommendation of collective impact as a framework for collaborative systems change, the Early Childhood Education Foundation (ECEF) [1] convened a group of stakeholders from across the state to form the Early Childhood Workforce Council. This use of collective impact, to influence the early care and education policy arena at the state level, is a novel use of the framework. Affiliated with a state university system in the central United States, the ECEF is uniquely positioned to partner with local, regional, and national stakeholders in early care and education. Using the conditions laid out in the collective impact model and cognizant of the necessary mindset shifts described above Kania et al. 2014; Kania and Kramer 2011), ECEF staff began mobilizing an intentionally diverse group of stakeholders in 2015 to create the Early Childhood Workforce Council. The stated aims of the Workforce Council are to increase the qualifications and diversity of the workforce in early care and education settings across the state.

The 40 initial members represented a broad cross-section of sectors and geographies across the state, including members of state agencies (e.g., Education Department and Health and Human Services Department), K-12 district administrators and teachers, leaders of organizations that provide support to districts, higher education administrators, non-profit members, business members, members of philanthropic organizations, and child care center owners. While this group has overlapping membership with other early childhood efforts in the state, it is unique in its composition, the vertical and horizontal articulation of those with vested interests in supporting efforts to increase the quality and quantity of early childhood programs. Council membership decisions were made intentionally, guided by an understanding of who could engage in a dialogue of

change across complex systems resulting in long-term policy shifts. The Workforce Council is chaired by two long-time leaders in the field of early childhood care and education, one of whom is the CEO of the Early Childhood Education Foundation and one of whom is a university administrator. Additionally, two members of the ECEF, both former university faculty with experience in early childhood education and child and family policy, serve as conveners. They are joined by an external facilitator from a neighboring state who serves as a neutral guide and thought partner through the development of the Council. Together, the two conveners are responsible for planning and running the quarterly meetings in an adaptive process that continually seeks and uses feedback from the members to guide the direction of the group towards a common agenda and the other conditions of collective impact.

In addition to the whole Workforce Council meetings, which began meeting in December of 2016, smaller working groups meet to work on specific issues. These large and small group meetings create spaces for dynamic deliberation, or consciously created environments for problem-solving across members with different viewpoints (Stone et al. 2001). Within these meetings, members are asked to place the larger goal of increasing the quantity of early childhood care and education workforce and increasing their skills and knowledge, above their own organizations goals. Further, the Council provides an uncommon forum for the voices of early education providers from the field to meet with policymakers (Doherty 2019; Shdaimah et al. 2018). As such, the use of a collective impact model at the state level can be seen as an effort to create a more structured policy network where there was only a loose issue network of organizations with a stake in early childhood care and education. Moreover, the structure and process of this collective impact effort may provide the spaces necessary to create shared understandings that drive collective action (Maitlis and Christianson 2014).

## Methods

This manuscript, the first from an ongoing ethnographic case study, examines the development of the Workforce Council, with a focus on mobilization, development of commitment, and the creation of a common agenda among a group of diverse stakeholders. During the first year of implementation, we focused on these components, as we believe they are foundational to the remaining conditions of collective impact. Although the collective impact process is non-linear, among the conditions for collective impact, developing a common agenda, or a shared set of goals, is highlighted as the first condition. Without a common agenda, shared measurement and mutually reinforcing activities would have little direction. The idea that a common agenda is foundational overlaps conceptually with the need for collective understandings to precede collective action (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). We posit that stakeholder mobilization, and subsequent commitment, to collective impact and the development of a shared understanding go hand in hand, as members bring their unique experiences and perspectives to the table to develop a common agenda. In turn, the agenda must be broad enough to maintain mobilization of stakeholders from across sectors and allow them to see their self-interest and how their organization can contribute to this common agenda (Author 2016).

Due to the “multiple and interactive components” of a collective impact initiative, the change-making process itself should be the focus of evaluation efforts (Sagrestano et al.



2018). This investigation seeks to understand the potential of a collective impact effort to serve as a state-level policy network in the early care and education policy arena by examination of the perceptions of the diverse Workforce Council members after their first year working together. While scholars have highlighted the need to collaborate in the early childhood care and education space (Del Gross et al. 2014), there remains a limited understanding of how collaborative processes operate at a systems-level that cuts across multiple sectors and policy arenas. The following questions guided the research (1) *What mobilized stakeholders to participate in this collective impact initiative?* (2) *What was the role of the backbone organization in the first year of the initiative?* (3) *How have members experienced the collective impact process?* (4) *What is the progress toward a common agenda?*

### Data collection

This study utilizes an emergent approach, specifically an instrumental case study method, to describe collaboration in a state-level use of collective impact for systems change (Stake 1995). The development of a common agenda is an emergent process and therefore must be studied using an explorative approach. Case study methodology is suited to capture this type of emergent phenomena that would otherwise be missed by standardized instruments. The primary investigator, the first author, has been an embedded participant-observer of the Workforce Council since November 2016. She was introduced to Council members as a university researcher and collected informed consent from a majority of members to participate in observations. Participants were aware that she took notes on both large group activities and small group discussions. Throughout, this researcher had a friendly rapport with participants. The second author has likewise been embedded in the Workforce Council as a participant-observer since May 2017. Both participant-observers attend Workforce Council meetings, along with planning and debriefing sessions. Council members were aware that both individuals provided general insights to the backbone staff and that they maintained member confidentiality in doing so. Due to this level of protection, we believe participants were forthcoming during interviews. Additionally, both interviewers collected additional informed consent from all Council members. Internal working documents provided by the conveners also increased the ability to triangulate results on the development of the common agenda and the theory of change. This analysis focuses primarily on interview data, described below.

Observations by these embedded researchers served as a basis for the development of a semi-structured interview protocol, in collaboration with the other authors. The embedded researchers then conducted semi-structured interviews with Workforce Council members and backbone organization staff at the end of the first year, February–March 2018. To fully represent the Council's diverse membership, the researchers made attempts by email and phone to recruit each of the members who had attended at least two of the first four meetings. Of the 39 council members contacted, 35 agreed to participate. Similarly, both council co-chairs were interviewed, along with members of the backbone staff, and the external facilitator. A total of 41 participants took part in interviews between 35 and 60 min. This study was conducted under IRB approval and

all participants signed an informed consent document prior to participation in observations and a separate consent document for interviews.

Researchers used a semi-structured interview protocol ([“Appendix A”](#) section) to allow for consistency and comparability of information to be collected from each participant, while still allowing interviewers flexibility to probe for depth in understanding of the research phenomena (Rubin and Rubin 2011). Questions for Council members focused on participants’ understanding of the needs of the early care and education workforce and the goals of the Council, as well as their perceptions of the meetings and relationships internal and external to the Council. Interviews with the co-chairs, backbone organization staff, and the facilitator focused on the creation of the Council, the planning and facilitation of meetings, and the day-to-day operations of the Council. Field notes from observations and documents were assembled as supporting evidence.

### Data analysis

An interpretivist framework was applied to ascribe meaning to socially constructed phenomena (Neuman 2006). Interpretivist frameworks seek to understand human experiences through the experiences of individuals, rather than to identify a single, universal truth. As such, we asked participants to reflect on their experiences in the meetings through which the common agenda of the Council was socially constructed through sensemaking processes (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). Data were explored inductively with consideration of the researcher as an active contributor to the research process (Hatch 2002). Multiple perspectives were sought during analysis, particularly as the Council purposefully brought together members from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Two members of the research team engaged in independent, asynchronous coding of interviews using QSR International’s NVivo 11 software. The primary investigator took the lead using thematic coding methods searching for meaning and patterns in the text (Guest et al. 2012). Iterative discussions between the research partner and primary investigator occurred at regular intervals, typically weekly, regarding the development, expansion, and consensus of codes and themes. Field notes and documents were consulted to provide additional contextual elements and clarity. Both researchers wrote analytic memos to synthesize and coalesce thoughts and reviewed each other’s results (Miles et al. 2014).

### Validity

Validity is a fluid construct in interpretivist research (Bazeley 2013). However, the researchers recognize and aspire to uphold the tenets of quality research practices. Throughout the study, steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the results. During design, the lead author and research partner developed interview questions and conferred with all authors on this paper for an additional appraisal (Guest et al. 2012). The two researchers are both highly skilled interviewers with doctoral-level training and specialization in these methods. This pair openly discussed data collection efforts and necessary modifications to the protocol in addition to managing all data directly. Interview site locations were at the participant’s discretion to increase comfort and ensure confidentiality (King and Horrocks 2010). Note-taking, in addition to audio recording, increased the accuracy of data collection (Kelly 2013). Data analysis and writing



incorporated multiple viewpoints and authorship. A presentation of preliminary results, with all the authors as an external review, invited new perspectives (Guest et al. 2012). The proliferation of detailed quotes including dissenting opinions was chosen to be part of the narrative to illustrate the fullness and range of participants' perceptions (Creswell and Poth 2017).

## Results

This study examined the first year of implementation of a diverse group of stakeholders using the collective impact framework to affect systems-level change in the early childhood care and education policy arena. From participant interviews, we identified four key results: (1) the importance of interpersonal relationships and diversity of perspectives in supporting mobilization and engagement; (2) the importance of the backbone organization in organizing and facilitating meetings as safe spaces for dialogue; (3) collaborative processes designed to facilitate the development of a common agenda; (4) the ongoing work of developing a common agenda.

### Relationships and diverse perspectives support mobilization

The conveners and co-chairs reported deliberate efforts to mobilize a diverse group, considering the vantage points and roles necessary to enact a sustainable solution. According to one of the co-chairs, recruiting members was easier due to the smaller size of the state and the ability to bring together a diverse group, while maintaining a manageable size. Likewise, this co-chair stated the positive existing relationships made it easier as there were no "sworn enemies" working in the early childhood space. According to one of the conveners, they identified organizations that needed to be at the table and then identified the right members. For example, she stated they wanted all of the state Colleges of Education represented and identified the deans as having the most control over "purse strings and decision-making power". At the state department of education, rather than recruiting the Commissioner, one of the conveners reported seeking department heads and associate commissioners who could make decisions and "pull together the worker bees to actually make it happen". According to the other co-chair, finding other members took a greater degree of networking, stating, "It was really a lot of talking and trying out." In particular, identifying teachers and child care providers took "a lot of conversations and calling people". During the Council's first 2 years, an additional home base provider was added to bring that perspective to the table. Participants reported that the recruitment of these members proceeded through personal invitations from the conveners or co-chairs, typically preceded by one-on-one conversations. The conveners and co-chairs reported deliberate efforts to build relationships with important stakeholders in early care and education across the state.

In addition to initial engagement, we asked what inspired members to continue to attend quarterly half-day meetings. About a third of participants reported that their motivation to work with the Council was the opportunity to represent a unique perspective. Practitioners identified bringing real-world perspective about the early care and education workforce. For example, one stated, "I am there to be a voice and to help hopefully shed some light as far as what early childhood looks like in the classroom and in the schools." Members of the business sector felt they offered a unique perspective,

including the importance of early care and education to attract new families to the state, as well as a strategy to grow the future workforce. Others reported being a voice for rural areas and smaller cities.

In turn, Council members also reported the opportunity to learn from a diversity of perspectives served as a source of motivation. A university administrator reported Council members “come from all walks of life. We have community members there, they have state department, they have K-12, university, people from foundation...They also have the actual practitioners, so that’s, that would be the draw.” A member of the business sector stated, “They’ve been doing this their whole lives in some form or fashion. That’s fun for me to be part of that group and learn from everyone there.” A K-12 administrator reported, “There was a lot of getting to know people, but I was very encouraged by the diversity of the group”, she continued, “I was really encouraged with this idea and concept that this is something that obviously the group is willing to take on statewide.”

In addition to the diverse membership of the group, participants reported that the meetings themselves provided a sense of motivation, including the attention on the part of the backbone staff to highlight the importance of the work. Others frequently described the meetings as “positive”, “comfortable”, “pleasant”, and “enjoyable”. They often compared them favorably to other, more typical, “potted plant meetings” and reported the meetings motivated them and created a sense of optimism that something useful would come from their work on the Council. Perceptions of meetings and affective changes in participants are further discussed in subsequent sections.

### **Role of the backbone organization**

Participants identified the importance of backbone organization, the ECEF, and the external facilitator in guiding meetings that provided space for dialogue in the first year of the initiative. This included providing reimbursement for members who traveled a significant distance to the meetings, as well as the efforts of conveners to ensure members had information and materials necessary to engage thoughtfully in conversation. For example, participants mentioned the preparation of information and materials, such as the binders containing Council documents. One participant described using the binder to refresh her memory and track the history of the group. Another Council member complimented the conveners’ communications, “They seem to have a great skill in gathering the information and putting it together and bringing it back to us at the next meeting that makes perfect sense.” Another reported the conveners did “a good job of feeding us bits of information about once every 3 months [rather than] piling on a bunch of reading or strategies. It keeps you engaged but not overwhelmed, which I appreciate.” One participant commented on how the thoughtfulness of the organization and preparation of meetings makes them seem important and another reported, “You can just tell the thought that goes into them from so many people on this team here at [ECEF]; the preparation, the materials, the communication throughout the year is really just tremendous.” These reports of preparation reflect the significant time spent by the conveners, co-chairs, and consultant to plan each meeting, which typically proceeded through planning meetings and phone calls.

Council members also reported positive perceptions of the facilitator, with one noting his ability to create a safe space for dialogue, stating, “He tries to ensure that all people

participate and that no one really dominates, so my experience has been a good one.” Others noted his ability to move the dialogue forward, with one participant stating, “I feel like he does a good job keep the meetings moving and not bogging down too much on anything, which is always a challenge when you have that many people together with a lot of different spots and agendas.” Another participant reported the facilitator and conveners have “been very good at keeping us on track. We haven’t jumped sideways. We kind of kept true to the initial mission and try to extend how we get there and work towards it, so I think it’s been a steady forward group.” Participants also described this forward momentum as a factor in continued engagement.

While most participants offered positive comments about the conveners and the ECEE, a member of another organization in the early care and education space expressed frustration that the relatively new organization had not considered the work of established organizations. This member stated, “I’m just being brutally honest—I don’t feel like anybody at the [Early Childhood Education Foundation] cares what anyone else is doing.” This comment reflects a potential pitfall of collective impact efforts when actors do not take into consideration previous collaborative efforts. Likewise, failure to consider previous efforts may lead some members to disengage if they feel like their previous and ongoing efforts in a policy arena are not considered or respected.

Overall, the behind the scenes efforts of the co-chairs, conveners, and external facilitator created experiences that supported space for dialogue and the collaborative processes identified in the next section.

### **Collaborative processes**

Participants were asked about their experiences at the meetings, as well as the goals of the Council. They identified several mechanisms that contributed to the process of developing a common agenda. Council members tended to describe the development of shared understandings among members as “getting everybody on the same page”. Participants reported this was necessary because many members “were maybe in a different place or viewing things differently than maybe the ECEF was viewing things.” Participants described the meetings as offering opportunities for learning and exchange between diverse members, including both structured and informal conversations, as well as offering shared experiences.

### ***Coordinated small group conversations***

Over a third of participants ( $n=16$ ) identified the importance of small group discussions to learn from the diverse perspectives of the Council members. One participant described the importance of the various perspectives: “If you’re listening openly, you are taking a piece of this person’s thinking and a piece of that person’s thinking and putting it all together.” She continued, “It just impacts your thinking and your ability to take things back to guide and facilitate for the people that you work with directly or to network different people together”.

Similarly, a member of a community organization identified small group conversations as “Getting us all on the same page.... We’re trying to curate some common understanding about different aspects of early education so that we can move forward together. That’s got to be intentional, and it does take time.” While some members expressed

frustration about this slow pace, others expressed the importance of taking the time to create shared understandings. One Council member reported, “I do think it’s important to not just bring the same people together because if you don’t kind of mix it up a little bit, you don’t ever get bigger ideas... I think it’s important to have that mix.” Another stated, “I think it takes some time for that to kind of gel.”

As recognized by a Council member, the conveners intentionally mixed up table assignments for each meeting. Members identified that this served two purposes, to increase the exchange of ideas and to build relationships. For example, one member reported, “Each time you met, you were with a different group, so it challenged how you were thinking.” Another stated, “Usually there’s a set seat for me so I don’t have to worry about people just sort of segmenting themselves with the same people over and over...I get to meet new people and have different conversations and share different ideas as we go.”

Participants often reported the meetings were “comfortable”, which appeared to contribute to discussions. For example, a K-12 administrator reported, “It’s been able to get top leaders from those places to come and sit together and talk and listen open-mindedly to get everyone to grow, and it has been able to sustain the work without judgment.” Similarly, a practitioner who described herself as “fairly new to the field,” stated she has been able to “sit down and talk with others and feel like my voice is important.” However, this feeling was not universal. Another practitioner reported feeling intimidated: “here [are] all these people in business suits, and it’s out of my comfort zone. Some of the people have higher education than I do and it’s kind of an intimidating environment.”

Although several Council members reported conversations contributed to shared understandings, others reported the difficulty of reaching shared understandings with over forty individuals: “The makeup of the Council. You know, I know it’s hard to get 40 people, if we are to come to agreement or consensus on things, I think that’s, that’s difficult... but I guess that’s what I have to say about that.” This challenge has revealed itself in tensions with members who continue to advance personal agendas, on which several members commented. One participant described frustration with one such source of conflict:

*I think that’s sort of frustrating because we’re at such different places. So while some of us are saying we think you could help with some common messaging, others are saying we don’t need that, we need to go over here; so, it’s kind of hard to figure out how we come together and really move something forward when we can’t [agree]—and with that many people, it’s a big Council. It’s like a lot of people to get to agree on anything.*

In addition to conversations among the diverse membership contributing to shared understandings, participants identified two shared experiences that contributed to shifts in direction and collective ‘a-ha’ moments. These are described below.

### **Shared experiences**

About a third of participants (15) identified the Brain Architecture Game<sup>1</sup> as an important learning opportunity and about a third identified a presentation on a public–private funding model. The conveners and facilitators reported both events were in response to the perceived needs of the Council. One convener described the brain architecture game as “transformational” for the group by developing a shared understanding of the importance of early care and education workforce quality. For those outside the field, the game served as an important learning opportunity. A member of a non-profit stated the experience was “a good learning tool for them [business people] to think more about how risk factors interfere with child development or family situation interfere with child development. I think it was an impactful exercise.” In turn, a member of the business community stated the importance of stacking positive experiences for children in the earlier years to get better outcomes. He continued using architectural terms:

*Those [experiences] build on each other. Once you lay that foundation, it is much more likely to carry out and lead to a much more successful career. The opposite is also true, which is unfortunate; those that don't have the right types of environment, that end up having these adverse childhood events, those aggregate amongst themselves and it becomes much more difficult to try to pull that kid out of what unfortunately for too many of them ends up being a downward spiral and we lose them, and that's heartbreaking.*

The second shared experience was a presentation on the use of braided public and private funding streams in another state. One participant stated this presentation was “really eye-opening” into the potential of the Council. Participants reported this event “energized” people by providing a “spark” for the Council. A K-12 administrator reported this presentation “shifted the group’s thinking to where the possibilities are out there.” This administrator continued, “They’re looking at models and there are ways to work toward our goals, and we just have to have the belief that we can, and I think the group started thinking more like that.” Another participant reported having additional conversations with members of a local non-profit organization, as well as members of the organization that presented the public–private funding model, to determine the feasibility of this model in the state. Another member identified differences in the state political climate, particularly in regards to the potential unintended consequences on the K-12 system that could create challenges for implementing this model.

### **Common agenda progress**

While participants identified mechanisms that contributed to shared understandings in their descriptions of the meetings, when asked to identify the goals of the Council, it became clear that establishing a common agenda was still an ongoing process. Council members identified nearly two dozen different, although related, goals. Additionally, seven Council members reported they were unsure of the goals or that they were in flux.

<sup>1</sup> The Brain Architecture Game is a tabletop game designed by the Developing Child Center at Harvard University. It is meant to engage a broad range of stakeholders in understanding the science of early brain development, including what protective factors support healthy development and what can make that difficult. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/the-brain-architecture-game/>.

The goal most frequently identified by Council members was increasing the quality and quantity of the early care and education workforce. For example, a Council member and K-12 administrator stated, “The goals are to make sure that every child has a highly qualified provider experience to help that child develop well.” For some members, workforce quality was described as the need to identify the skills, competencies, and standards for this workforce.

The second most frequently identified goal addressed the need for increased funding and compensation. For example, a member of the business community stated, “Part of the goal is we need to expand the scope of services so that we are providing more opportunities, and that’s going to require more workforce and we are going to need to pay for the workforce better because that’s how we’re going to entice them.” A Council member who works in a community organization also identified professionalization or respect and recognition the early childhood workforce places in child development.

Council members also frequently identified educating various stakeholders and developing both public and political will as a necessary course of action. For example, a member of the business community who referenced his own experience as a young parent stated the need to develop political will for governmental change. For example, one member stated the importance of “educat[ing] the public on how important early childhood education is, because if the public doesn’t care, then at the end of the day, you’re not going to make gains.” Similarly, a state agency director identified the need to educate the public to create a groundswell of support. For example, one stated, “I would say at the very basis of it, it would be awareness statewide or a larger population awareness of what the issues are. I think that is the foundation of it all.”

In addition to building public support in the face of limited political support from elected officials, several members noted that change could be handled at the regulatory level within state agencies:

*Oh, of course, policies. We’re going to have to change a few policies. I think, however, a lot of the policies...can be done administratively and through the Board of Education. There’s a tendency to find policy change as only a legislative change and that can take too long, it can often get done wrong and it’s hard to prescribe and then set up a system that can be nimble and adaptive to changes across time. I think we should pay as much attention, if not more, to administrative changes.*

While most members identified at least one goal of the Council, several felt unclear of the goals or that the goals were in flux. For example, a K-12 administrator questioned whether the original goals were still relevant, while a member of the business community felt the group had gone off course, stating, “I think the original target was workforce, quality, competency, and numbers. I feel like we’ve gone way outside of that.” Another member stated, “I don’t understand the goals of the Council very well”, and a third stated the goals have “sometimes been a frustration”.

### Results summary

Taken together, the results suggest that while Council members have yet to solidify a common agenda, several processes and mechanisms are in place to support the continued mobilization, or commitment, of members, as they continue to work through



their differences to create shared understandings. These include the co-chairs and backbone organization staff's attention to interpersonal relationships, creating a comfortable and welcoming environment, providing the opportunity for formal and informal conversations, and creating shared learning opportunities for the diverse membership. As a group, the members acknowledged the time necessary to create shared understandings among a diverse group of stakeholders while also appreciating the ongoing conversations and communication that create a sense the Council is moving forward together.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This study described member perceptions of the first year of work of a collective impact effort focused on creating systems-level change in the fractured policy arena of early care and education. In particular, we focused on questions of mobilization and commitment of members, the efforts of the backbone organization, the processes used to support dialogue, and progress towards a common agenda. In this section, we discuss the main results.

### **Mobilization and commitment**

Fostering the commitment of diverse stakeholders to the development of a common agenda is essential for systems-level change and affecting large-scale social outcomes (Kania & Kramer, 2011), such as sustainable, widespread improvement of early care and education through the development of a highly skilled workforce. The results highlight the importance of deliberate relationship building in order to recruit diverse members, particularly those who may not typically be included in leadership tables, such as the practitioners on the Council.

The personal invitations of members reflect the importance of credible champions who can mobilize individuals (Hanleybrown et al. 2012). In the case of the Workforce Council, these manifest in the co-chairs, two highly credible individuals with experience in early care and education research and higher education administration. One, in particular, has a long history of working on state-level early care and education initiatives. Additionally, a lead partner, such as a backbone organization, with legitimacy in the policy arena can serve to broker linkages between partners (Bryson et al. 2006). While the organization serving as the backbone organization is relatively new, it carries legitimacy in its connection to the state university system, along with the name of key funder and employment of one of the co-chairs as director.

The importance of deliberate invitation on the part of champions and a backbone organization with legitimacy reflects Stone et al. (2001) assertion that social capital alone is insufficient to generate systems-level change. Deliberate efforts to bring people together across boundaries are necessary, as well as ongoing efforts to create relationships among members provided a source of commitment. While Kania and Kramer (2011) do not identify stakeholder mobilization as a condition for collective impact, we posit mobilization and continued engagement of a diverse group of stakeholders as an important precondition that must be attended to by insuring the right eyes are on the problem and the right mix of the right stakeholders are at the table (Kania et al. 2014). Our results suggest that diversity is indeed a strength of the

Workforce Commission, with members identifying the importance of learning from others' perspectives. Yet, the diversity of perspectives creates challenges in developing a common agenda.

### **Backbone organization and strategies**

The backbone organization in this study engaged in several strategies that supported the work of the Workforce Council. First, the commitment to mobilize a diverse group reflects the mindset shift of the need to bring diverse perspectives together into a richer dialogue that can generate shared understandings of the problem (Kania et al. 2014). Participants consistently recognized the value of diverse perspectives, as well as the time necessary to create shared understandings among them. They also identified the mixing of groups as a strategy to provide members with boundary-crossing experiences (Crosby and Bryson 2010) that allowed individuals to learn from one another, build relationships, and develop a sense of common membership that helped focus the agenda development at a collective, rather than individual level.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, backbone staff, facilitator, and co-chairs demonstrated the second mindset shift identified by Kania et al. (2014) in their attention to taking the time and deliberate steps to build relationships among members. The deliberate attention to creating a welcoming environment on the part of the conveners and the efforts of the facilitator to ensure all voices are heard contributed to the creation of a safe space. In particular, creating a safe space may contribute to the trust that serves to both bring people together and allow dialogue to flow (Bryson, et al. 2006). Allowing time for this process builds confidence in and dialogue among all members and prevents later scapegoating and a lack of motivation (Crosby and Bryson 2010; Fulton 2012). Similarly, safe space for exchanges contributed to social capital and engagement (DeLeon and Varda 2009).

Similarly, the creation of meetings as safe spaces appeared to support the dynamic deliberation in these new civic spaces. Stone et al. (2001) refer to these as civic spaces and identify the importance of dynamic deliberation of cross-sector actors within these spaces to develop shared understandings that contribute to civic capacity and the ability to act on systems-level problems.

Our results demonstrate that such spaces must be deliberately created and curated to allow participants to engage in challenging conversations, or dynamic deliberations that result in the types of shared understandings that Stone et al. (2001) identify as necessary to engage in collective action across sectors. Our results also reflect earlier research that suggests the importance of facilitation for public policy development (Cooper et al. 2006) as it supports bringing together disparate ways of knowing to influence a particular decision (Quick and Feldman 2011). The results also reflect previous research that has identified the importance of a backbone organization and the commitment of resources to support it (Weaver 2014).

### **Development of a common agenda**

Although still in the early stages of development, deliberations and exchanges of Workforce Council members can be seen as initial steps to developing collective cognition that contributes to shared understandings and the development of a common agenda. Collective cognition has been conceptualized as an inherently social process that precedes

collective action at the organizational level and governmental level (Bryson et al. 2006; Stone et al. 2001; Taylor and Van Every 2000). Additionally, collective cognition has been shown to impact collective efficacy, the team's belief its ability to solve a problem, as well as the final outcome of the team (Chou et al. 2012; Emerson et al. 2011; Gibson and Earley 2007). The social processes that lead to collective cognition require trust as both a "lubricant and the glue" (Bryson et al. 2006, p. 47). In terms of mobilization, the Workforce Council appears to have contributed to creating a non-hierarchical policy network to replace a less organized issue network in the early care and education policy arena. This work was supported by attention to developing a common agenda over advancing individual goals, and the deliberate mixing of those across organizations and status.

Despite the attention to creating spaces for deliberation and time to develop relationships, participants' descriptions of the goals of the Workforce Council demonstrate that they were still developing a common agenda at the end of the first year together. This suggests the need for continued dialogue between members to create collective cognition of statewide issues in early childhood care and education workforce, as well as the need to identify and frame potential solutions (Benford and Snow 2000; Stone et al. 2001). The variety of goals identified by members indicates the need for ongoing attention to narrowing the agenda, as well as building trust in the intentions of the backbone organization to allow that agenda development to be driven by the members through the facilitated conversation, shared learning experiences, and opportunities for social exchange. Given that Sagrestano et al. (2018) found the creation of a common agenda required significant amounts of time, sustained investment, and a shift in how members view collaboration, it is not surprising that the Workforce Council had not yet developed a common agenda after 1 year. This suggests a continued need for deep, open, bidirectional communication to break down existing power structures and create a common agenda.

### Limitations

Before concluding, we identify the limitations of this study. First, we were unable to interview every member and did not interview those that had only attended one meeting or the one individual who dropped out over the course of the first year. Therefore, we cannot provide a counterfactual as to why some members did not commit to the process. Second, the study is limited in that these interviews relied on participants' memory of four meetings across a year, which many of the members reported was challenging for them. Similarly, the interview data provide only a snapshot of participants' understandings and does not allow for us to follow participants' commitment and understandings over time. However, it is anticipated that such interviews will be repeated annually to allow examination of commitment and shared understandings as the Council moves forward. Lastly, we recognize the unique nature of the Council, including its location in a state with a relatively small population, as evidenced by comments from participants about the ability to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders that remained manageable in size. Similarly, we recognize the unique nature of the backbone organization and its capacity to commit resources to a 3-year-long process. Despite these limitations, this study's use of in-depth interviews informed by observations of the Council provided

a unique opportunity to understand the process and mechanisms of collective impact and their effect on individual members.

### Implications

This study provides insight into the initial stages of collaborative systems-level change by examining the processes and mechanisms used to create a collective impact effort in the fractured policy space of early childhood care and education. The results suggest three key implications, particularly for organizations seeking to take on the role of backbone organization in collective impact efforts that serve as a policy network at the meso-level between state and agencies and organizations.

First, we identify the importance of identification of a backbone organization with capacity and resources to support the development of collective impact. The backbone organization committed a significant amount of time of two conveners and brought an external consultant onboard to facilitate meetings over a 3-year period. Participants identified the care and attention put into the meetings, from the materials and food to facilitation. For participants traveling significant distances, the backbone organization also provided reimbursement for travel costs. Collective impact has become a 'hot topic,' yet the resources necessary to support successful mobilization and processes that lead to a common agenda suggest it may not be a ready solution for all problems. Weaver (2014) suggests that the commitment of adequate resources, particularly to support the backbone functions, along with influential champions and a sense of urgency, is a key form of readiness for collective impact for systems-level change. Indeed, Weaver (2014) cautioned that short-term funding and funding that does not support a backbone organization is perilous and undermines the collective impact process.

Second, the development of a statewide collective impact group with the intention of creating wide-scale, sustainable changes requires careful selection of members. This careful selection includes mapping organizations that will be represented at the collective impact table, as well as an explicit focus on crossing boundaries to set the groundwork for an integrative leadership model (Crosby and Bryson 2010). Choosing key leaders within the state who had individual authority and collective influence (Bryson et al. 2006; Emerson et al. 2011; Kagan et al. 2012) allows the Council to be successful and have long-term sustainability. Participants reported the importance of identifying members who have decision-making power within their own organizations. They also identified the importance of bringing practitioner voices to the table and ensuring they are able to participate on equal footing as leaders such as deans. This work proceeded largely through professional networks, but could include more intentional mapping of stakeholders.

However, our results also suggest that within these key leaders, attention be given to sectors, geography, and other local factors that reflect the necessary diversity of views to create engaging learning opportunities as the group moves towards a common agenda. This work is supported by ongoing attention to relationships. This includes creating a welcoming environment, intentionality in mixing up members at each meeting, the leadership style of the co-chairs, the organization of the conveners, and the skills of the facilitator. While prior research has identified the need to get the right stakeholders to the table (Lawson 2004), we reflect on the importance

of engaging leaders who have credibility in their field, such as the co-chairs in this study, as well as extensive professional networks. We also identify the importance of a skilled backbone organization staff and their ability to foster positive relationships with members. We further identify the importance of skilled facilitation (Quick and Feldman 2011) that can create a safe space for members to engage in dialogue that allows all members to feel as if their voice is heard and contributes to shared understandings and a common agenda.

The third implication of this study is the importance of embedding external researchers as participant-observers in the collective impact process. Over the course of the first year, these participant-observers built rapport and trust with members that contributed to what we believe to be forthcoming interviews. We believe Council members felt safe to share criticisms and conflicting views because only aggregate, general data were shared with the conveners. Further, the use of ethnographic strategies of observation at each meeting supported the development of an interview protocol designed to probe Council members' perceptions of the processes and mechanisms they experienced at meetings.

In addition to generating knowledge for publication, the participant-observers provided general observations to the conveners as a source of feedback about the process and participants' perceptions. These objective observations and interviews complemented the written feedback from Council members after each meeting and structured debriefing process conducted by the backbone staff. The backbone staff is actively using the content from the interviews to craft future agendas and activities to foster continued motivation, commitment, and a common agenda for the Council.

Additionally, embedding researchers in a collective impact effort allowed for multiple data collection strategies that provided, and will continue to provide over the Council's development, a richer data set to understand the processes and mechanisms of collective impact at the state level. To date, this work has included a survey and an additional round of interviews, which will inform future manuscripts that document the next phase of the work. This will include examining both sets of interview transcripts for shifts in thinking about the common agenda, as well as mindset shifts around collaboration (Kania et al. 2014). We also intend to seek out how conflict and frustration among members were handled and how they changed the development of the Council. Further analysis will also examine the shift from the mobilization of members to commitment following the recent public launch of the Council's final report on the early childhood workforce in the state and their recommendations. Future research on the Workforce Council will include the mobilization of community-level groups to engage locally on issues of early childhood care and education, as well as the relationship between these grassroots groups and state-level efforts, such as the Council.

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**Appendix A****Interview protocols****Council members**

I appreciate you taking time to help me with my study. I am going to ask you a series of questions and listen to your answers. With your permission, I will tape record your responses to ensure accuracy. I can stop the tape at any time if you are uncomfortable. I will maintain the confidentiality of your comments, and your identity will not be revealed in any notes or publications. This interview consists of 12 questions and should take approximately an hour.

If you agree to participate, I will need your consent in writing (present consent forms). Do you have any questions about the study or consent before we begin? I have a copy of the consent for you to keep and it has my contact information if a question or concern arises later.

1. Just to get started, can you tell me your name and the organization you represent on the Council?
  - a. What is your role in that organization?
2. Before the Council, how have you been involved in early childhood issues in [State]?
3. How do you understand the needs of early childhood in [State]?
  - a. Workforce competencies?
  - b. Workforce development and support?
4. Thinking back to the very first meeting in December 2016 [or their first meeting] what did you think about early childhood?
  - a. How did you understand the needs in this state?
  - b. What did you think about child care quality?
  - c. How do you understand workforce competencies?
5. What got you to come back to the March meeting [their first meeting]?
6. We've now had a year of Council meetings, how has your thinking on early childhood care and programs changed?
  - a. Quality?
  - b. Workforce?



7. Reflecting back, how did you come to know that/think that way?
8. What activity or event helped you understand early childhood workforce differently?
  - a. What was an ah-ha moment that changed your thinking?
9. Tell me about the relationships among Council members?
  - a. Have you developed any new relationships?
10. Before the Council, who did you usually talk to about early childhood or about post-secondary education?
11. Now who do talk to when you do your homework?
  - a. Has that changed?
  - b. What are those conversations like?
12. How do you see the Council's work unfolding in your organization or community?
13. What keeps you motivated to come back?
14. What are you looking forward to in year two?

#### **Interview protocol council backbone organization staff**

I appreciate you taking time to help me with my study. I am going to ask you a series of questions and listen to your answers. With your permission, I will tape record your responses to ensure accuracy. I can stop the tape at any time if you are uncomfortable. I will maintain the confidentiality of your comments, and your identity will not be revealed in any notes or publications. This interview consists of 12 questions and should take approximately an hour.

If you agree to participate, I will need your consent in writing (present consent forms). Do you have any questions about the study or consent before we begin? I have a copy of the consent for you to keep and it has my contact information if a question or concern arises later.

- 1) For the record, can you tell me your name and your position in the Foundation?
- 2) Can you describe the Foundation and its role?
- 3) The Council was formed to address the workforce needs in early childhood in the state. How was this need identified?
  - a. How was workforce identified as an important leverage point for early childhood quality?
  - b. Who was involved?
  - c. How has the issue been addressed in the state previously?
- 4) How was the decision made to form the Council?
  - a. Who was involved?
  - b. What influenced this decision?
- 5) How were members identified and recruited?
  - a. Walk me through that process.

- 6) What are the Council's goals?
  - a. How were they developed?
  - b. Who was involved?
  - c. To what extent have they been met (shared vision, fostering consensus for the needed improvements, and facilitation of collaboration)?
- 7) Where did the Framework come from?
  - a. How was it developed?
  - b. Who was involved?
- 8) What is the theory of action or theory of change of the Council?
  - a. Who developed the theory of action or theory of change?
  - b. How?
- 9) How are Council meetings planned?
  - a. How do they align with the blue print and the theory of action/change?
  - b. How did you decide to bring the facilitator to the table?
- 10) To date, how do you think the Council's work is going compared to the Framework?
- 11) What else needs to happen to meet the goals of the Council?
  - a. What other stakeholders need to be engaged?
  - b. What organizations need to change?
  - c. What policies, regulations, or laws need to change to support the goals of the Council?

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