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Introduction

Assessing QRIS as a change agent

ABSTRACT

This opening commentary presents the catalyst for organizing a special theme issue on QRIS as a Change Agent and summarizes its 12 articles. A brief assessment of the "state of QRIS" is offered, followed by a suggestion of two additional policy approaches worthy of consideration by policymakers as part of efforts to increase the availability of consistently strong early childhood education programs for young children.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) as a Change Agent was initiated as a special theme issue of the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* with a Call for Papers (Call) issued in Spring 2012. Edited by Steve Barnett, Stacie Goffin, and Kimberly Boller, the Call observed that QRIS had evolved over the previous ten years from a seldom-used approach for informing parents about child care quality to a ubiquitous tool for standardizing states' early care and education (ECE) programs. The Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge made QRIS a centerpiece of its grant application, pushing QRIS forward as the linchpin in ECE systems-building activities. More than half of all states have QRIS, and the remaining have them in development (Office, 2014). Initially developed as a market-based strategy for improving program quality, QRIS has become a delivery system for professional development and, more recently, been positioned as an accountability tool revolving around child outcomes (Zellman & Karoly, 2012). As Boller and Kelly (2014, in this issue) note in their commentary, QRIS's range of purposes adds to the complexity of assessing their effectiveness as a change agent.

Is our investment in QRIS leading to desired changes?

Also noted in the Call, and starkly underscored by the 23 submissions received, was the extent to which research has not kept pace with QRIS practices. Limited research exists to answer questions about the extent to which QRIS is or can function as an effective change agent in terms of increasing program quality to a level that positively affects children's learning and development, alters choices made by families when choosing an ECE setting, or reduces ECE's programmatic and systemic fragmentations. This lack of evidence is worrisome given the policy dominance of QRIS and the relative neglect of other potential policy approaches to improving quality and driving systemic change. It remains uncertain as to whether QRIS offers policy makers a viable approach for transitioning from a system providing variable and generally low levels of program quality in out-of-home settings to one that consistently facilitates reliably high-quality for children and families with respect to caliber of programming and teacher-child interactions. Research presented in this special issue indicates QRIS is still in a developmental stage, suggesting it is too early to draw broad conclusions about the effectiveness of QRIS as an approach for transforming ECE, although the papers offer evidence-based guidance on improving QRIS's efficacy.

QRIS as a Change Agent sought to expand the evidence available regarding the effectiveness of QRIS by fostering a deliberate and systematic examination of the strengths and weaknesses of QRIS as a vehicle for improving children's ECE experiences. More specifically, the Call sought evidence on the effectiveness of QRIS in improving program quality, the ECE workforce, children's learning and development, and systems. It invited theoretical papers; comparisons of QRIS to alternative policy approaches, and examination of measures appropriate for use by QRIS, including their strengths and weaknesses in assessing teaching and learning environments. At the implementation level, we sought comparative description and analysis of the design and implementation of QRIS across states, simulations of alternative QRIS designs, case studies on the implementation of statewide QRIS and approaches to quality improvement, and studies of the efficacy of QRIS within different ECE sectors. Finally, we sought research on the market penetration of QRIS, and research on its cost, financing, and sustainability.

Few of the submitted manuscripts addressed the issue of systems change; most addressed fundamental issues of QRIS design, an indicator of the state of knowledge and expertise regarding QRIS. Nonetheless, the 12 manuscripts accepted for this special issue suggest an emerging evolution in the nature of QRIS studies that at present focus primarily on validating rating systems as measures of program quality and teaching effectiveness – necessary preconditions for QRIS to positively influence the overall quality of ECE programs. Whether QRIS leads to tangible quality improvements or positive results for children, however, is only beginning to be studied.

Consequently, ten of the special issue's articles focus on informing the design and validation of QRIS. Two articles address

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questions on the systemic effects of QRIS on quality. These two clusters are used to organize the summaries of articles included in the special issue. Interestingly, none of the 23 manuscripts submitted explored cost, financing, or sustainability.

In the first cluster, revolving around QRIS design and validation, Sabol and Pianta (2014, in this issue), present a validation study of the Virginia Star Quality Initiative. Examining the relationship between the ratings of state-funded targeted pre-kindergarten programs and children's literacy basic skills, they found stronger growth in higher-rated programs during the pre-kindergarten year. Differences in children's growth from the spring of preschool to the fall of kindergarten or during the kindergarten year as a function of pre-kindergarten programs' ratings were not found.

Hestenes and her co-authors (2014, in this issue) investigate links between QRIS ratings, process quality, and children's socio-emotional development. They did not find that individual levels of star ratings represented distinctive levels of classroom quality but did find that ratings differentiate classrooms at lower and higher levels of quality. Star levels predicted children's social-emotional outcomes to varying degrees.

Noting variability in decisions about where to set thresholds on quality measures used for program assessment, Le, Schaack, and Setodji's study (2014, in this issue) uses generalized additive modeling (GAM) to identify social and cognitive threshold levels for Colorado's QRIS. They found evidence of baseline thresholds that needed to be surpassed before significant relationships could be observed between process quality measures and outcomes. Ceiling thresholds also were found, beyond which gains on process quality measures were associated with little to no improvements in children's social and cognitive outcomes.

Hong, Howes, Marcella, Zucker, and Huang (2014, in this issue) assess the concurrent validity of a local QRIS and simulate QRIS scoring using a secondary data set to predict child outcomes. Their study found positive correlations between QRIS indicators and continuous measures of child care process quality.

Zellman and Karoly (2014, in this issue) also demonstrate the use of a simulation, or "virtual pilot," in this instance to inform the design of a statewide QRIS using two different California data sets. Their work suggests the value of using existing data to address key design questions in early phases of QRIS development. Based on the simulation, they found California's quality ratings would vary based on the ages of children in participating programs and whether the program was home-or center-based, and they demonstrate how alternative design decisions can favor some providers over others.

Yazejian and Iruka (2014, in this issue) studied change in the quality of center-based ECE programs and family child care homes participating in a QRIS in Miami-Dade County, Florida. They found that program quality increased over time. For centers, quality improved with the length of time in the QRIS and the amount of support for quality improvement provided to a program by the QRIS. Similar associations with quality improvement were not found for family home child care. Their findings add to an observation generated by Zellman and Karoly (2014, in this issue) regarding differential impact of states' QRIS on home-based settings.

Extending beyond individual states, Connors and Morris (2014, in this issue) compared child care licensing regulations across all 50 states and the District of Columbia and aligned them with six possible QRIS profiles. They found classroom quality is more strongly emphasized by QRIS than by facility licensing standards and that only two states emphasize classroom process in both sets of standards. From a systems perspective, the study also highlights a relationship between a largely voluntary QRIS and a required standard-setting system.

Looking across two states, Indiana and Maine, Lahti, Elicker, Zellman, and Fiene (2014, in this issue) applied four recommended approaches to validating QRIS. Their findings highlight the importance of a multifaceted validation of QRISs as part of their ongoing development and refinement that includes examining: (1) the validity of the conceptual components of the QRIS; (2) the psychometrics of the ratings; (3) the results of the ratings (distribution of provider scores and progress toward higher ratings) and the association of ratings with process quality ratings and parent evaluations; and, (4) associations between QRIS ratings and child development. Lahti and colleagues identify concerns associated with each approach and assess the strengths and limitations of these approaches to validating states' QRISs ranging from low participation and improvement rates to a lack of association between ratings and children's outcomes.

Examining the rubrics of quality levels as expressed through the specification of standards and echoing findings found in other articles in this special issue, Kirby, Caronongan, Malone, and Boller (2014, in this issue) employed mixed methods to investigate implementation of the quality rating process in five state- or county-wide QRIS. Although common components are found across the five QRIS, considerable variation existed in what was required at the baseline level; greater similarity was found in requirements at higher rating levels. Yet, these differences did not uniformly translate into similar patterns in the actual components of program quality observed. The study's qualitative interviews provide insights into why QRIS design and implementation vary within and across states.

Also addressing variation in QRIS design and implementation, the last paper in this cluster, by Boller and her colleagues (2014, in this issue), is one of the only randomized controlled trials conducted in the context of a QRIS. In this early pilot of a state system, they found significant impacts on the observed quality of centers and family child care homes in the six months after the start of QRIS supports (coaching, professional development activities, and financial incentives), but no impacts on QRIS ratings. Features of the rating system that kept impacts on quality from translating into impacts on QRIS scores are discussed.

Transitioning to the second cluster of articles, Tout (2013) has noted that limited research and evaluation has focused on whether and to what extent QRIS generates systemic consequences. Two articles in the special issue attend to this new realm. Hatfield, Lower, Cassidy, and Faldowski (2014, in this issue) examined variation in the availability of high-quality ECE programs participating in the state's QRIS across communities as a consequence of differences in program funding characteristics, community socioeconomics, and interactions among program and community variables. They find inequities in the availability of quality programs. In particular, children in low-income communities had access to lower-quality programs, suggesting systemic inequities. When additional public resources were made available, however, ECE programs in low-income communities appeared to make larger improvements in their quality than programs in other communities.

Finally, Tarrant and Huerta (2014, in this issue) employed qualitative methods to investigate the contributions of QRIS to quality improvements through the lens of new institutional theory. Their findings indicated that quality improvements fostered by Colorado's QRIS were influenced by the participating program's initial rating level, and that the QRIS had a perceived stronger influence on structural quality than process quality. Programs that had lower initial quality made more substantive change, while those with higher initial quality reported making more symbolic change. They also found the QRIS modestly strengthened the ECE system, increasing the value accorded child care and promoting a more unified definition of quality, that, nevertheless, remains contested. They note, as well, the limited reach of the QRIS due to its voluntary nature and the high cost of improving quality that can more easily be accommodated by public programs. Finally, in the context of new institutional theory, the authors highlight QRIS's