



Validating Virginia's quality rating and improvement system among state-funded pre-kindergarten programs[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education programs' quality ratings are the key output of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), yet there is little empirical evidence as to whether these ratings relate to child outcomes. The present study examines associations between state-funded targeted pre-kindergarten programs' ratings in Virginia's QRIS and children's growth in pre-literacy skills through kindergarten ($n = 2448$ children in 71 pre-k programs). Children in higher-rated pre-kindergarten programs had sharper literacy growth in the preschool year compared to children in lower-rated pre-kindergarten programs. There was no difference 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. Implications of these findings are discussed toward understanding the potential of QRIS to assess quality in pre-kindergarten programs.

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At the state and federal level, policymakers are struggling to improve the quality of early childhood education settings. The increased effort to improve the quality of early childhood care partly is motivated by the strong evidence that high-quality non-parental care substantially improves outcomes for young children (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010). Yet, a substantial number of children are attending early care that is mediocre at best, even among regulated pre-kindergarten programs (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012). Moreover, disadvantaged children are disproportionately exposed to programs with lower quality, often participating in programs with larger class sizes, less educated teachers, and classrooms typified by lower relational quality (Burchinal & Cryer, 2003).

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) address the need for systematic and widespread improvement of quality by pushing beyond basic licensure requirements within individual states. QRIS not only provide the metrics to assess quality, but also provide levers to facilitate improvement in the quality of early childhood education. To do so, they clearly delineate quality standards, assess and monitor performance through ratings, and incentivize and support quality improvement based on programs' ratings. The logic model for QRIS posits that early childhood education program ratings will create a local market for high-quality care with parents having greater demand for higher-rated programs. This local demand will motivate providers to attempt to improve their rating by improving the quality of their program, consequently incentivizing parents to select their program. The increased motivation and support of early childhood education programs to improve quality will expose more children to higher quality and lead to better outcomes for children (Tout et al., 2010; Tout, Zaslow, Halle, & Forry, 2009; Zellman, Perlman, Le, & Setodji, 2008).

Almost every state in the U.S. is developing or implementing a QRIS (Tout et al., 2010; QRIS National Learning Network, 2013). Despite the rapid expansion of QRIS, there is virtually no empirical evaluation of their operation or the alignment of QRIS ratings to empirical evidence of their effects (Tout et al., 2009). Because empirical evaluations of the QRIS are still in their nascent stages, a good foundation for work on the effectiveness of QRIS will rely

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on the validation of the QRIS components. Better understanding whether the rating structure utilized in the QRIS measure aspects of quality that relate to children's functioning and development will help ensure the use of valid measures and rating structures, as well as support future empirically sound investigations on the effectiveness of QRIS for improving school readiness. The present study validates the rating system in Virginia's QRIS, the Virginia Star Quality Initiative (VSQI). We examine the association between star ratings and children's literacy skills upon school entrance, as well as associations with children's growth in literacy skills across preschool and kindergarten.

1. Background on Virginia's QRIS: The Virginia Star Quality Initiative (VSQI)

Virginia's QRIS, the Virginia Star Quality Initiative, offers a useful setting for QRIS validation work as it defines ratings using quality standards with strong empirical support, uses a unique rating structure to create star ratings, and is a relative newcomer to the QRIS landscape. Piloted in 2007 and officially implemented in 2008, the main goal of the VSQI is to provide a consistent way to distinguish the level of quality in early education programs within the Commonwealth of Virginia. Similar to many other QRIS, the VSQI is a volunteer system in which communities elect to participate in the system and early childhood education programs volunteer to participate within that community (Tout et al., 2010).

The quality standards and rating structure used in Virginia's rating system have some important differences and similarities to other QRIS. Programs are assessed on four quality indicators: (1) education, qualifications, and training of staff; (2) teacher-child interactions; (3) structure (i.e., staff-to-child ratio); and (4) environment and instruction (see Appendix Table A.1). Every QRIS in the country uses some form of staff qualifications as a quality standard and the VSQI is no exception. Additionally, almost all states, including the VSQI, use scales from Environment Rating Scales to measure environment and instruction (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005). Half of all QRIS measure staff-to-child ratio or group size, although the cut-points vary substantially between states. Differing from other QRIS, the VSQI measures the quality of teacher-child interactions through use of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008), which is gaining popularity as a measure of quality, but is a much less used observational tool compared to the Environmental Rating Scales.

In the VSQI, the four quality standards are converted to a star rating (out of five stars) using a point system, in which points for each standard are summed. Ratings are calculated based on the centers' total points falling within the range for a specific rating level with no required minimum score for individual quality standards. Only four other states use a point system to generate program ratings (Tout et al., 2010). A much more common approach to converting indicators of quality to ratings is a building block approach in which states prescribe a number of mandatory standards that a program must meet in order to achieve a certain level or rating.

2. Validation of QRIS rating system and quality standards

There are many potential outcomes of interest of QRIS, such as providing a quality framework, unifying early childhood education programs under one system, or promoting professionalization of the early educator workforce. This paper focuses on the ways in which QRIS ratings relate to children's development, building off the assumption that child outcomes are a key outcome of QRIS.

Past research provides little evidence on whether we may expect that the aggregate star ratings relate to child outcomes. Most validation investigations on other states have examined correlations among QRIS quality standards, or correlations among QRIS quality standards and outside measures of quality. These methods focus on internal concurrent validity of measures rather than linkages to outcomes. For example, studies in Oklahoma and North Carolina found that a program's ratings based on the structural elements of the program, such as licensure status and group size, were related to independent observational assessments of structural and process quality (Bryant, 2001; Norris, Dunn, & Eckert, 2003). On the other hand, a study conducted in Colorado's QRIS found few associations between quality standards that measured structural quality and independent measures of process quality (Zellman et al., 2008).

To date, a few studies have linked quality standards to child outcomes, with mixed findings (Ma et al., 2013; Norris et al., 2003; Thornburg, Mayfield, Hawks, & Fuger, 2009). For example, Thornburg et al. (2009) found an association between star ratings and children's socioemotional development in Missouri's QRIS. On the other hand, Zellman et al. (2008) evaluated Colorado's QRIS using a variety of child outcomes, including academic performance, language skills, and classroom behavior, and failed to find evidence that individual QRIS quality standards were associated with children's preschool performance. Additionally, they found no consistent relations between star ratings and child outcomes. However, due to relatively high levels of child attrition, it is difficult to make any broad generalizations to other states' systems.

2.1.1. Relation between VSQI quality standards and child outcomes

Despite the lack of research exploring relations between QRIS aggregate ratings and child outcomes, the extant literature has found links between the individual quality standards employed in the VSQI and a range of positive developmental outcomes for children, including improved cognitive ability, socioemotional skills, and language development (Burchinal, Kainz, & Cai, 2011; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; NICHD ECCRN, 2002). Yet, the magnitude of effects varies substantially across quality standards. Below we review findings that examine the relations among the four quality standards employed in the VSQI and outcomes.

2.2. Standard 1: education, qualifications, and training

The VSQI determines the level of quality for the first standard using the education level, years of experience, and professional development/training of directors, teachers, and assistant teachers within the center. Research linking structural features of teacher qualifications to child outcomes has often yielded equivocal findings. Early et al. (2006) failed to find that teacher education, particularly having a Bachelor's degree or higher, was directly related to children's achievement gains. However, there may be indirect relations between teachers' qualifications and outcomes. McDonald-Connor, Son, Hindman, and Morrison (2005) found that teachers with more years of education were associated with teachers with greater warmth. In turn, teachers with more warmth had students with stronger vocabulary skills. Teachers' years of experience and their participation in targeted professional development experiences can also predict teacher quality and effectiveness (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007). In terms of director qualifications, directors with more education often provide more effective support for teachers, particularly when teachers have lower levels of education. There is little evidence that director or assistant teacher qualifications directly relate to child outcomes (Zellman & Perlman, 2008).

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