Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Validation of a local implementation in LA County and children's school-readiness

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ABSTRACT

As states are actively participating in the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, research that validates the translation of child care quality measures for policy purposes is required. This paper presents results from a two-part study on QRIS ratings: (1) Study 1 examines the concurrent validity of a QRIS, and (2) Study 2 simulates the QRIS scores with a secondary dataset to predict child outcomes. Study 1 – the QRIS descriptive study – presents the pilot-study data from the L.A. County QRIS collected between 2009 and 2012. Data from 254 early childhood programs (98 family child care homes and 156 centers with 331 classrooms) indicate that individual quality rating indicators do contribute to an overall score, and the simulated scores were related to external measures of child care quality. Study 2 – the QRIS simulation study – included 223 low-income 3- and 4-year-old children in 101 early care and education classrooms/programs; one-quarter were dual language learners. Continuous measures of child care quality were positively associated with children's school-readiness. However, after quality measures were combined and scored into QRIS ratings, ratings were no longer associated with increases in cognitive/academic and social child outcomes across the school year. The lack of an association between QRIS ratings and child outcomes is consistent with findings from other studies and warrants further examination of QRIS ratings and their effect on children's learning.

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Introduction

Previous research illustrates the well-established link between the quality of early care and education and children's school-readiness (Howes et al., 2008; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002, 2003; Shonkhoff & Phillips, 2000). For example, recent meta-analysis demonstrated that higher quality early care and education relates to higher language, academic, and social skills, and fewer behavior problems (Burchinal, Kainz, & Yaping, 2011). Taken together, these studies show that high-quality early care and education in the form of intensive teacher–child interactions relates to children's school readiness outcomes.

Due to the significance of quality in early care and education programs, states and counties have establishedQuality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) over the last decade, and recently with support from the Federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant (RTT-ELC). QRIS collect information about the quality of ECE programs, convert scores from continuous quality measures into categorical quality indicator ratings, and combine the categorical quality ratings into overall program-level ratings which provide benchmarks that give programs information relevant to improving their quality (Tout et al., 2010; Zellman & Fiene, 2012). These program ratings are made publicly available to parents and policy-makers, with the intention of incentivizing voluntary improvement (Schaack, Tarrant, Boller, & Tout, 2012; Zellman & Perlman, 2008). QRIS are typically developed through a constituent-based process intended to improve quality through consensus on outcomes considered to be important by the local QRIS decision-making committees (Zellman & Fiene, 2012). As such, QRIS may have broad and diverse goals such as improving school readiness outcomes for children, professionalizing the early care and education workforce, enhancing family outcomes, or improving parent's knowledge of local programs. Unfortunately, relatively little attention has been paid to examining the empirical basis for specific implementations of QRIS and the link between QRIS indicators considered to be

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important by the stakeholders with the intended outcomes. The current paper describes and measures the potential impact of a local QRIS in Los Angeles County (LA QRIS) to inform future states' policy making with a particular focus on children's outcomes.

Common QRIS indicators

Due to the diverse stakeholders who contribute to the development of QRIS, a wide array of quality indicators may be included in QRIS ratings. Many QRIS are structured so that basic health and safety standards related to child care licensing form the anchor at the lowest end of the rating structure, and accreditation by a nationally recognized early childhood agency guide the requirements for the top rating, although more variability exists at the bottom end of the scales than at the higher levels (Caronongan, Kirby, Malone, & Boller, 2011). Ratings vary in the criteria that they include, but some of the most common elements are: licensing compliance, learning environments, staff qualifications, efforts to strengthen and form partnerships with families, administration and management, and accreditation (Tout et al., 2010). Additional criteria include the use of research-based curricula, teacher–child ratios and group size, child assessment, health and safety, cultural and linguistic diversity, provisions for children with special needs, and community involvement.

These quality indicators are typically measured by observational measures of children's experiences with their teachers and peers which are scaled with continuous measures, and checklist measures of structural quality and program engagement with families and the community, both of which need to be translated into points or categorical quality ratings depending on the structure of the individual QRIS. The underlying assumption of QRIS ratings is that higher ratings will have a stronger association with desired outcomes of the system, like children's school-readiness. To date, little research is available to guide states in making decisions regarding cut-points in these quality measures and the concurrent validity of ratings that combine differing thresholds of varying measures, therefore, sharing descriptive information among states on the cut-points and the relation of those cut-points to QRIS related goals is valuable in guiding state QRIS decision-making.

While there is growing consensus within the research community that teacher–child interactions are the main predictor of school-readiness outcomes, QRIS generally contain many more elements than teacher–child interactions which may relate to child outcomes or other goals related to ECE systems building (Caronongan et al., 2011; Elicker, Langill, Ruprecht, & Kwon, 2007; Schaack et al., 2012; Tout et al., 2010). For example, an older research literature linked higher teacher education levels to teacher practice which was assumed would translate into better child outcomes (Howes, 1997; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000; Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997). As a result, many QRIS include teacher preparation through both formal education and certification. To further complicate the development of QRIS ratings, early care and education regulations in the United States are differential depending on the age of the child and the auspice of the program, therefore group sizes, ratios, and even environmental rating systems such as the Environmental Rating Scales (ERS; Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2007; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998; Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2000) are differential by age group as well as by form of care setting (family child care and center based care), creating a complex set of guidelines for calculating QRIS ratings.

QRIS ratings and school-readiness

Some of the strongest predictors of children's gains in pre-academic skills are teacher instructional interactions, warmth and

responsivity, so we would expect that quality ratings based on measures of teacher–child interactions would be of particular relevance in improving children's outcomes within QRIS systems (Howes et al., 2008). Teachers' instructional interactions with children predict children's academic and language outcomes, while teachers' emotional interactions with children predict children's social skills (Mashburn et al., 2008). Additionally, teacher classroom practices (i.e., intensity of involvement, child centeredness, and developmental appropriateness) relate to children's language and academic skills, while teacher–child closeness relates to children's cognitive and social skills (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Although a predictive relation has been established between these continuous measures of teacher–child interactions and children's development and school-readiness, little research has been done to translate these continuous predictors into categorical ratings or points as are frequently utilized in QRIS ratings and to examine if these relations persist. More information is needed about various QRIS scoring configurations and children's school-readiness.

A recent study explicitly examined variations in scoring approaches used by state QRIS by simulating the scoring configurations of nine states using existing data from a large study of public pre-k (Sabol, Soliday Hong, Pianta, & Burchinal, 2013). This study found that overall QRIS scores were generally not predictive of gains in children's school-readiness skills across the school year in highly rated programs regardless of the type of scoring approach adopted by states with complex quality indicators. However, examination of variation of ratings across state criteria showed that states that streamlined their ratings to focus on teacher–child relationships were more predictive of child outcomes than rating systems that were inclusive of additional and at times loosely related criteria. This secondary study reflects the results of state QRIS evaluations that report mixed results for the predictability of QRIS ratings on child outcomes (Barnard, Etheridge Smith, Fiene, & Swanson, 2006; Child Trends, 2010; Thornburg, Mayfield, Hawks, & Fuger, 2009).

Implementing a local QRIS

The LA County QRIS (LA QRIS) incorporates many of the common quality indicators that comprise QRIS ratings across the country. For this reason, and due to the diverse nature of the child and family population in combination with historically low levels of quality observed in ECE programs, the LA QRIS was examined as an example of QRIS in the United States. Additionally, although the LA QRIS is a county-level project, it is comparable to other state-level QRIS due to the large number of licensed child care providers, which is higher than the number of providers in 46 states (Los Angeles County Policy Roundtable for Child Care, 2006).

A potentially unique feature of the LA QRIS is that it grew out of several decades of collaboration between a local university partner and a group of stakeholders, including a five-year process of developing and pilot testing of the QRIS rating matrix, and the LA QRIS is inclusive of programs that serve children from birth through kindergarten entry in multiple ECE auspices including centers and FCCs that are housed, regulated, and funded by various agencies. However, in a similar process to other counties and states, a policy planning group comprised of a variety of stakeholders involved in the child care field were also involved in the consensus-focused process which incorporated alignment of QRIS ratings with state and local regulations and paperwork requirements: from practitioners, to child and family service providers, to child and family program developers, to local/county level policymakers, and university researchers.

The goals of the consensus-driven process were to create a rating system that would have face validity to the local community, that the ratings would be meaningful and useful to them for quality improvement, and that the ratings would align with other