



# Comparing state policy approaches to early care and education quality: A multidimensional assessment of quality rating and improvement systems and child care licensing regulations



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## ABSTRACT

This article compares states' written Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and child care licensing regulations on their inclusion of key dimensions of early care and education (ECE) quality highlighted in prior research and theory. Using a newly developed 66-indicator policy rating index, data pertaining to ECE settings that serve 3- to 5-year-olds were gathered from the written policies of all 50 states and the District of Columbia. This index was designed to provide a nuanced measure of state ECE policy by differentiating between monitoring *structure* and *process* quality in the learning environments for *children* and *teachers*. Indicators were summed into four standardized subindices, and cluster analysis was used to identify groups of states with similar policy profiles. Results indicate the existence of six state policy profiles defined primarily by variation in QRIS policies. Overall, classroom process quality is more strongly represented in QRIS than in child care licensing; only two states emphasize classroom process in both types of policy. State policy profiles vary significantly on spending on state-funded PreK, but profile membership is not significantly related to other state demographic and ECE characteristics or to extant ratings of policies governing state-funded PreK and child care licensing. By taking this multidimensional approach to rating and grouping two important state ECE policies simultaneously, nuanced variation in policy is revealed that is not captured by measures of the strength of a single policy alone. As such, this study represents a first step toward understanding specific monitoring approaches reflected in state policy as potential mechanisms for improving the quality of ECE classrooms and programs.

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There is substantial evidence that high-quality early care and education (ECE) can help to support young children's cognitive and social-emotional development as well as health outcomes (Zaslow et al., 2010). Indeed, Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, and Mashburn (2010) find that a moderate-to-high quality early learning environment is the *minimum* required to produce an association with positive preacademic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes for children. Furthermore, a growing body of research suggests that process quality, or the quality of the interactions, relationships, and social processes between and among teachers and children, is particularly important for children's development (Burchinal et al., 2008; Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010)—perhaps even more important than structural aspects of quality.

Policy is the context in which all ECE programs exist. Thus, to the extent that policy projects a coherent and consistent message of our values, definitions, and goals, it may influence programs' internal policies and practices and may determine how ECE programs are structured and experienced by staff, families, and children (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Fullan, 2000). While process aspects of quality have been argued to be more predictive of child outcomes than structural aspects of quality, the traditional view both in policy practice and in the extant literature has been that process quality components are “unregulable”. However, the recent development in many states of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) represents a popular and promising approach to focusing ECE policy on quality—particularly on process quality.

The story of ECE policy in the United States is one of great diversity. In the absence of federal policy governing standards for ECE programs serving the vast majority of the nation's children, individual states have each developed their own definitions and regulations. The exception, of course, is the federally funded and

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regulated Head Start program. However, Head Start served less than 10% of all U.S. children—roughly 1/3 of eligible children—ages 3–4 in 2005 (Laughlin & Davis, 2011). As such, the result is the current patchwork “non-system” under which there is not only state-to-state variation in quality standards required of programs, but also policy variation within states based on program type, funding stream, and in some cases location in a particular county or city. But the need to empirically examine the nuances of policy approaches to maintaining and raising ECE quality is not diminished by the myriad ECE policies that have been implemented in recent years with this express purpose (Tout et al., 2010). On the contrary, these policies’ varied approaches to defining and supporting quality, coupled with the persistent low quality of so many ECE programs despite these efforts, illustrates the need for further investigation into alternative policy approaches to raising quality (Tout et al., 2010).

In this study, we ask how states’ policies vary in their approach to monitoring and promoting ECE quality using a comprehensive set of information from written policy. Prior approaches to assessing state policies have utilized only a portion of the information available in the written documents, typically focused on the strength of the policy along primarily structural dimensions (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011; Fuller, Raudenbush, Wei, & Holloway, 1993; NACCRRRA, 2011). While such work has been an important first step in comparing states’ ECE policies, we extend that work with a more nuanced view of the variety of existing policy mechanisms of quality monitoring and improvement. More specifically, we take a multidimensional approach to this question by examining key dimensions of ECE quality highlighted in prior research and theory, and we array those approaches into policy “typologies” that may differentially support ECE quality. This work is analogous to that conducted for employment policies internationally (Gornick, Meyers, & Ross, 1997); we use this approach to provide a descriptive understanding of the similarity and diversity of ECE policies across states. As such, this work aligns well with the goal of this special issue in comparing and contrasting across state approaches to ECE policy, including those with and without a QRIS system. We see this work as a critical first step toward exploring the potential impact of QRIS and other state policy approaches on ECE quality.

### Defining ECE quality

Research is fairly conclusive about the importance of high-quality ECE experiences for children’s growth and development (Zaslow et al., 2010). In this study, we follow Cassidy et al. (2005) and take a comprehensive approach by defining quality in terms of two separate but complementary components—structural and process quality. Structural quality is related to the resources and organization of resources present in the ECE program or classroom. While it is a necessary foundation for supporting children’s learning, evidence suggests that structural quality alone is not sufficient; it is only weakly associated with positive child outcomes, at best (Burchinal et al., 2010; Early et al., 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008). On the other hand, process quality—which is related to the interactions, relationships, and social processes between and among teachers and children—is more strongly associated with a variety of positive cognitive, social–emotional, and behavioral outcomes for children (Burchinal et al., 2010).

Similar associations have been found in regard to learning environments for teachers, for whom positive outcomes may be measured by the quality of their classrooms. Prior research has shown that coursework (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009) and the use of online videos (Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008) alone do little to change teaching practices or classroom quality. However, more process-oriented approaches to professional

development—onsite or online consultation and coaching—have been shown to be quite successful at raising classroom quality (Boller et al., 2010; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Pianta et al., 2008b; Ramey et al., 2011; Raver et al., 2008).

Thus, the distinction between *structural* and *process* components of quality exists at both at the level of the *classroom*—those elements most proximal to the learning environment for children, and at the level of the *program*—those elements most proximal to the learning environment for teachers. As illustrated in Fig. 1, these distinctions result in four discrete aspects of ECE quality that may be targeted by state policy: (1) classroom structure, (2) classroom process, (3) program structure, and (4) program process. This multidimensional and multilevel approach to quality is based on Seidman and Tseng’s (2011) framework for social setting action that argues that structural components of quality—*resources* and the *organization of those resources*—will only result in high-quality learning environments for children to the extent that they positively influence the *social process* components of both program and classroom quality.

Indeed, a series of randomized controlled trials of professional development and curriculum interventions provides evidence to support the link between social processes that support teachers’ learning (*program process* in Fig. 1) and social processes that support the learning and development of preschool and early elementary-age children (*classroom process* in Fig. 1; e.g., Chicago School Readiness Project, Raver et al., 2008; 4Rs Program, Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; and RULER Feeling Words Curriculum, Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2012). This position, supported by literature on teachers’ social networks (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Darling-Hammond, Mullmaster, & Cobb, 1995) and professional communities (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; King & Newmann, 2001; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995), suggests that frequent discussion and partnership among teachers helps to create a normative culture of collaboration, and conversely an existing climate of collaboration encourages more partnership and discussion among teachers in a process that Fullan (2000) terms “restructuring.” As posited by Fullan, these processes are indeed found to be associated with (a) more highly effective professional development efforts (King & Newmann, 2001); (b) teachers who feel a sense of engagement, empowerment, and responsibility for their school as a whole and are more innovative in their classrooms (Bryk et al., 1999); and ultimately with (c) positive changes in classroom quality and children’s outcomes (Elmore & Burney, 1999).

In sum, this evidence and theory suggest that when policy targets the social processes of an ECE program directly, teaching practices and teachers’ learning is placed at a premium. By emphasizing these evidence-based mechanisms of learning (social processes at the program and classroom levels), this theoretical framework lays the foundation for empirical exploration of the ways that policy creates a coherent message regarding ECE quality.

### Current state policies

In order to focus on between-state policy differences, it is necessary to find some commonality in state policies that rise above the regulatory differences associated with program type and funding stream that are so prevalent *within* states. As such, and with the goal of evaluating the policy context of *all* of the many diverse ECE programs that provide care and education for young children, we examine only policies that apply across multiple sectors of ECE and exclude regulations applicable only to one particular funding stream. Many prior evaluations have been limited to the regulations of only one public funding stream (e.g., state-funded PreK in Barnett et al., 2011; Head Start in Puma et al., 2010), and thus have not assessed states’ philosophies (as expressed through written policy) about what is expected of all programs caring for young children.

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