Reviewing and Clarifying Goals, Outcomes and Levels of Implementation: Toward the Next Generation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

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Overview

This brief summarizes a keynote speech prepared by Martha Zaslow and Kathryn Tout and delivered by Zaslow at BUILD Initiative's Annual QRIS National Meeting, August 1, 2013.

The purpose of the brief is to contribute to the next generation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) by reviewing and clarifying goals and outcomes along with the activities aimed at strengthening these, as well as the levels of implementation needed for a systems initiative.

We propose that there are outcomes implicit in QRIS that need to be fully acknowledged, along with the quality improvement activities that would contribute to them. We also propose that it is critical to articulate the multiple levels at which a systems initiative must be implemented. We articulate a framework that can support design, revision, validation, and evaluation of QRIS. This brief serves as the introduction to a forthcoming product from the Quality Initiatives Research and Evaluation Consortium (INQUIRE) supported by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation that will articulate the framework's components in more detail.

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Introduction

The recent proliferation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) in states, territories, and localities reflects a collective priority and investment in improving the quality of early care and education. With multiple QRIS newly launched, in development, or undergoing revision, it is an ideal time to review and update our understanding of goals and outcomes of QRIS, as well as the activities aimed at improving these. As we return to and reaffirm the concept that QRIS focus on systems, it is also an ideal time to articulate more fully the levels of implementation that a systems initiative requires. This brief provides a starting point for a revised conceptual framework for QRIS that incorporates new evidence from research and practice and acknowledges the complexities of system development and implementation. It is intended to spark dialogue among QRIS stakeholders who can articulate further details of the framework and

who can use it to support the development of logic models that are specific to particular state or local QRIS.

The brief is structured around four interrelated themes:

1. A QRIS is not a single intervention. A QRIS serves as a structure that supports multiple outcomes and includes multiple activities. QRIS logic models should be developed to articulate the multiple outcomes and the sets of activities aimed at improving each. These logic models can then be used to monitor operations and progress, and improve system effectiveness over time.

2. Thinking further about the multiple outcomes of QRIS, we see an expanded conceptual framework for QRIS as including outcomes

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for children as well as outcomes for families, programs, the workforce, and early care and education systems. The system activities to support this array of outcomes should be articulated explicitly so they can be assessed in rigorous QRIS validation studies.

3. An expanded conceptual framework for QRIS also recognizes the specific practices and interactions that most directly and strongly support children's growth and development. Validation studies that assess children's development without also documenting whether QRIS activities are in place to improve specific quality practices and interactions could produce misleading results.

4. As the name makes clear, QRIS have a clear focus on systems. As systemic approaches, QRIS are embedded across multiple implementation levels, from a state agency to a classroom. This complexity should be acknowledged and planned for through the work of implementation teams. Specification of expected outcomes for the QRIS should take into account phase of implementation.

QRIS as a System Hub for Quality Improvement

Though QRIS were envisioned as "system builders" early in their development (see Mitchell, 2005), QRIS developers and administrators initially reported challenges in engaging in the collaborations needed to achieve real integration of services and resources (Tout et al., 2009). Funding from the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grants reenergized the potential of QRIS as structures through which system efforts can be coordinated and targeted, and states committed to goals such as expanding the types of programs participating in their QRIS, strengthening QRIS standards, aligning monitoring efforts, and leveraging technical assistance and incentives across the system (Stoney, 2012).

QRIS can best be conceptualized as a hub that organizes and provides a framework for efforts at a systems level: a systemic structure or umbrella. Under the umbrella, QRIS include a wide range of activities (including measuring and rating quality, delivering and coordinating technical assistance, establishing financial incentives, and disseminating consumer information).[1] This broad and complex conceptualization of a QRIS requires well-articulated logic models that can specify the activities, linkages, and partnerships expected to support desired outcomes. While QRIS may contain activities that are considered to be interventions (for example, targeted support for classrooms to implement a particular curriculum or to improve teacher-child interactions), QRIS should not be conceptualized as a single intervention.

Logic models can support states and localities in charting a course for QRIS work by organizing efforts to:

- Identify and align expected outcomes – near-term, intermediate, and long-term – with the system activities that will produce the outcomes. This planning process is critical for ensuring that system stakeholders have a shared and realistic understanding of expected QRIS outcomes and the investment (resources and activities) necessary to achieve the outcomes.

- Monitor inputs, operations, outputs, and outcomes. Performance management is necessary for ensuring that activities are being carried out as intended and desired results are achieved.

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1. The notion of QRIS as an umbrella or framework for multiple quality improvement efforts has been described by Linda Smith, Deputy Assistant Secretary and Interdepartmental Liaison for Early Childhood in the Administration for Childrend and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. http://www.buildinitiative.org/TheIssues/BUILDingStrongFoundations/tabid/223/PostID/8/Continuous-Quality-Improvement-QRIS-Is-a-Tool.aspx

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- Examine the linkages between activities and outcomes. Evaluation can support a deeper understanding of how the QRIS is working and what may be facilitating or impeding success.

- Improve and refine the QRIS. Logic models can support a process of continuous quality improvement that uses findings from monitoring and evaluation to make needed refinements or revisions.

Support for QRIS logic model development is available in the *QRIS Evaluation Toolkit* (Lugo-Gil et al., 2010). Logic models developed from an expanded conceptual framework of QRIS will need to go beyond typical QRIS logic models (which specify activities for programs and parents and converge on school readiness outcomes) to include greater specification of workforce supports (training and technical assistance), system linkages (for example, linkages with licensing, child care subsidies and professional development), and multiple outcomes (for children, families, programs, the workforce and system).

Expanded Outcomes for QRIS

As noted, typical QRIS logic models identify improved child outcomes as the ultimate goal of QRIS. Support for child outcomes is underscored in recent policy initiatives such as the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grants, which emphasize the need for early care and education systems to promote the healthy growth and development of children. While recognizing the centrality of children's outcomes in QRIS, it is important to identify how other central outcomes of QRIS should be acknowledged and articulated. Ironically, not coming to terms with or only partially acknowledging these other critical outcomes can weaken efforts to understand how QRIS support children's outcomes.

Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge applications confirm that QRIS developers have planned for expanded goals (Stoney, 2012). These should be articulated as intermediate or long-term outcomes with clear linkages to activities so they are acknowledged appropriately in validation studies. Importantly, QRIS developers, in collaboration with partners, should be explicit about activities that may not have a direct link to children's outcomes. These specifications will ensure that validation studies test appropriate linkages and do not seek to link certain activities or quality indicators to child outcomes when they are in fact expected to contribute to other outcomes (with an indirect link to children).

What additional outcomes should be specified for QRIS? The following three are proposed as an illustration, not as an exhaustive list:

- **Increasing the professionalization of the early care and education (ECE) workforce.** The 2011 National Academy of Sciences workshop on the ECE workforce articulated workforce professionalization as a goal in its own right. Quality indicators or standards for this outcome would relate to staff qualifications. Activities supporting workforce professionalization would include providing scholarships, making career advisors available, and creating career lattices, so that members of the workforce can see professional development paths for their careers.

- **Improving ECE as a system.** This outcome could be addressed through alignment of quality standards across different types of early childhood care and education as well as alignment between early learning standards for children and core knowledge and competencies (CKCs) that early childhood professionals (both teachers and technical assistance providers) must have. The CKCs also need to be linked to professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals so they have opportunities

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to acquire the skills they need to promote children's learning in key domains. Quality indicators related to ECE as a system might include standards related to licensing compliance, accreditation, and CKCs. Specific activities to support improved system functioning include facilitation of partnerships and collaborations across the system.

- **Enhancing family outcomes.** Potential family outcomes include strengthened parental understanding of how to support child development, and improved work-family life balance. Quality indicators to support enhanced family outcomes would be included in domains such as family partnerships and community involvement. Activities to support these outcomes include provision of parent education about school readiness and high-quality early care and education.

While each of these further outcomes might indirectly (and eventually) contribute to child outcomes, improvements in each of these further outcomes would not be anticipated to be directly and immediately related to improved child outcomes. The link to child outcomes would be indirect rather than direct. Improvements in child outcomes would be seen as resting most directly and immediately on those activities affecting children's experiences of interactions in early care and education.

As discussions of expanded QRIS outcomes continue and stakeholders take on the challenge of incorporating these outcomes more fully in QRIS logic models, it is important to note the need for data collection and data systems that can capture critical information about the outcomes. Likewise, research to investigate these additional outcomes must be equally as rigorous as studies examining children's outcomes.

Expanded Conceptualization of Children's Outcomes

In addition to specifying outcomes beyond child outcomes in QRIS logic models, when children's development is the outcome being considered, it is important to incorporate findings from new research examining links between quality components and children's outcomes. Research on quality and children's development has been progressing in important ways and can shed light on the aspects of quality that are the strongest and most direct contributors to children's outcomes.

A recent study funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) asked, "Which features of quality are most important to child outcomes?" (Burchinal, Zaslow & Tarullo, under review). The study involved replicated analyses across eight early childhood datasets. The study compared global measures of quality, including the physical environment, routines, and practices, with more specific measures that either focus on the quality of interactions of caregivers and children (how emotionally supportive or cognitively stimulating these are) or go deeper to document interactions that support development in specific domains (for example, stimulation for early language development, and stimulation for self regulation). When both the global and the more specific measures of quality were considered at the same time, it was the more specific measures that were consistently the strongest predictors of children's development (Burchinal, Zaslow & Tarullo, under review). Thus, supporting children's outcomes through QRIS may require quality improvement actitivies involving more intensive supports focusing on interactions in specific domains, as well as measurement of these.

Supporting children's development in QRIS may also require giving greater weight to those indicators with a more-direct relation to child outcomes. Within current QRIS indicators, those that promote use of evidence-based curricula and teachers' use of assessment to individualize instruction are examples of indicators that may reflect a child's experience more directly than, for example, administrative practices in programs (Boller,

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2013). However, it is necessary to understand in depth how practices related to curriculum and assessment are being implemented with children. This remains an open challenge for quality measurement.
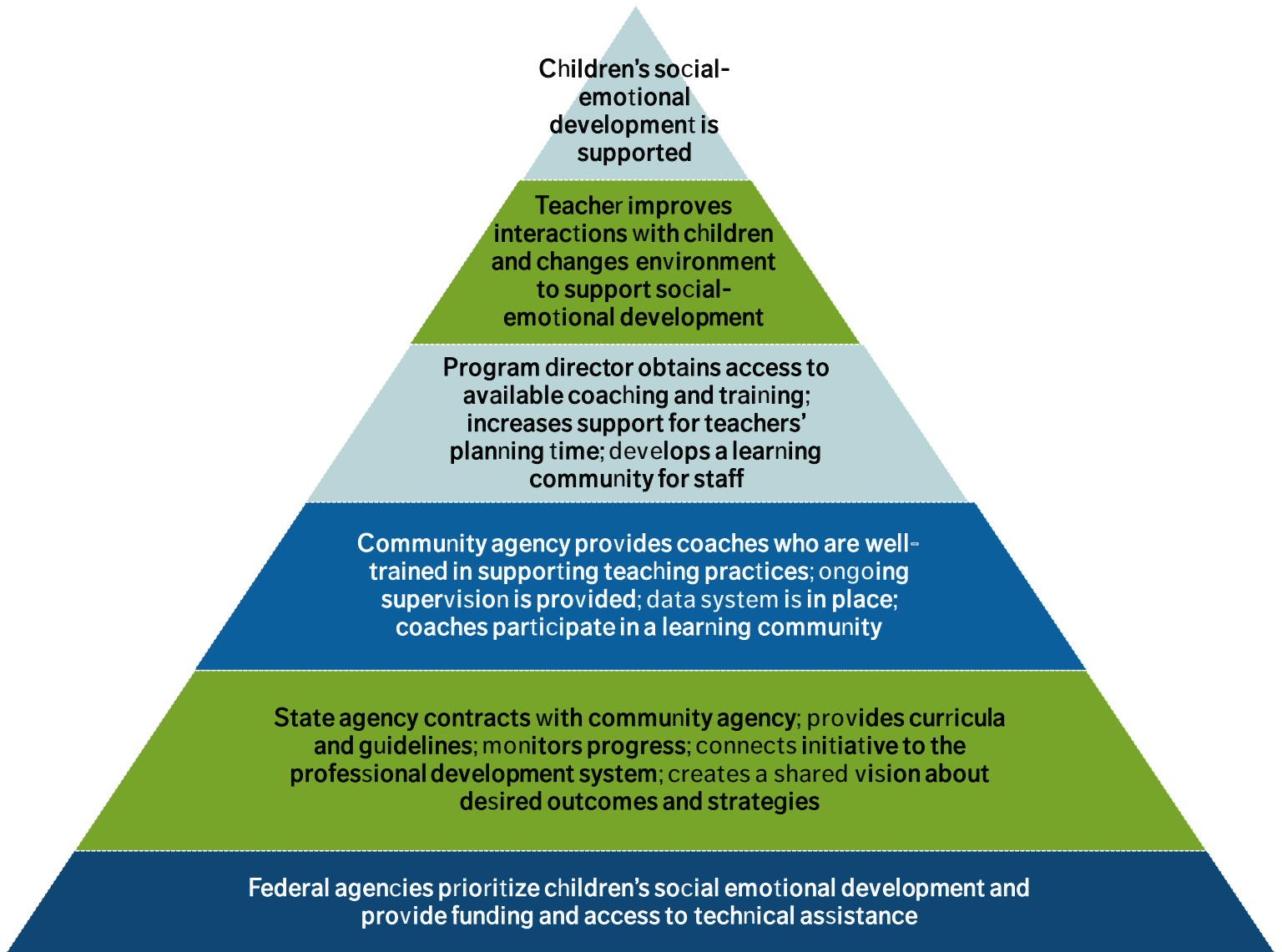
A third strategy for supporting children's outcomes in QRIS is through coaching and other technical assistance (Zaslow, Tout & Halle, 2012). Research demonstrates that coaching is related to improved practices and the quality of children's environments; in a number of evaluations, coaching was found to be related to improved children's outcomes (Aikens & Akers, 2012, Tout, Isner & Zaslow, 2012). Research also demonstrates, however, that coaching needs to be clearly targeted at specific features of quality and children's experiences. The coaching approach also needs to be specified enough so that fidelity of implementation can be assessed and monitored. Work to date suggests that virtually all QRIS are employing coaching approaches or other technical assistance (Smith et al, 2010; Tout et al., 2010). But, important questions remain about whether the particular coaching approaches being used are specified enough and intensive enough to affect child outcomes (Smith et al., 2012; Zaslow, Tout & Halle, 2012).

Levels of QRIS Implementation

A final theme to explore in a revised conceptual framework for QRIS is implementation. Especially because QRIS focus on systems, it is critical to acknowledge that QRIS activities are implemented across multiple system levels. The provision of appropriate support for QRIS activities can be facilitated by recognizing that implementation of these activities occurs at the level of individual teachers and caregivers and their classrooms or groups, programs, communities, and states, as well as at the federal level (Halle, Metz, & Martinez Beck 2013).

To ensure implementation of early childhood interventions with fidelity, implementation strategies must be aligned and coordinated up and down these levels. Figure 1 illustrates this by noting the levels of implementation needed for an intervention to strengthen children's social and emotional development that might be one set of activities within a QRIS.

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Figure 1. Levels of implementation* to support children's social-emotional development

Children's social-emotional development is supported

Teacher improves interactions with children and changes environment to support social-emotional development

Program director obtains access to available coaching and training; increases support for teachers' planning time; develops a learning community for staff

Community agency provides coaches who are well-trained in supporting teaching practices; ongoing supervision is provided; data system is in place; coaches participate in a learning community

State agency contracts with community agency; provides curricula and guidelines; monitors progress; connects initiative to the professional development system; creates a shared vision about desired outcomes and strategies

Federal agencies prioritize children's social emotional development and provide funding and access to technical assistance

*Model based on work described by Metz and Bartely (2012), Paulsell, Austin and Lokteff (2013), and Paulsell, Tout and Maxwell (2013)

An important step for policymakers and QRIS developers is to articulate the core implementation activities at each level. Planning by "implementation teams" can help with:

■ identification of core implementation activities at each level;

■ mapping of the relationships that are involved in implementation across levels; and

■ identification of the sequence in which activities should occur.

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Implementation teams can help with spotting potential disconnects across levels of implementation in advance. A disconnect might occur, for example, if coaches who work out of a community agency are not coordinating and communicating with the director of a program, or if planning at a state level is not fully communicated to the community level.

Implementation teams can also play a valuable role in supporting different components of QRIS implementation. An implementation team can track progress across all levels of the system to support full implementation of a QRIS. Researchers working on validation studies should work closely with implementation teams to understand the stage of implementation of a QRIS and use this information to guide their evaluation activities. Proceeding with validation studies before a QRIS has reached a stage of relatively stable implementation may result in unexpected results and premature conclusions about how the QRIS is working.

States also need to address issues of QRIS sustainability—how to keep the system running smoothly when it is fully implemented, and how to ensure that the QRIS is revised over time to take into account new contexts and information about effective practice. An implementation team can be charged with building in feedback loops and creating a schedule for periodic revisions and continuous quality improvement of the system (Paulsell, Tout & Maxwell 2013).

Summary and Conclusion

We are far enough along in the work of developing QRIS that we can review and revisit our initial conceptual frameworks. This review suggests that a conceptualization of QRIS as a single intervention is not accurate. QRIS are instead a hub or umbrella for multiple activities that support quality improvement. Activities that fall under this umbrella clearly aim at strengthening child outcomes. But we need to fully acknowledge that the umbrella encompasses other important outcomes (that may only indirectly and over time contribute to children's development). Such outcomes include strengthening families, the professionalization of the early childhood workforce, and strengthening early care and education systems. Being explicit about these other outcomes, and articulating and measuring the activities that support them, will help prevent including too wide a range of quality indicators in validation models predicting to child outcomes. Strengthening these validation models focusing on child outcomes will also depend on including indicators of those activities in QRIS that research points to as most directly and strongly related to child outcomes. Lastly, fully acknowledging that QRIS focus on systems requires awareness of all levels in a system at which activities need to be implemented, as well as consideration of the phase of implementation at which the activities at different systems levels are occurring. Validation studies should take into account phase of implementation and adjust research activities accordingly.

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