

Substantive or symbolic stars: A mixed methods analysis of quality rating and improvement systems through a new institutional lens

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Project Description

In an effort to improve and unify early care and education, policymakers in numerous states have developed quality rating and improvement systems, a policy that establishes common quality standards for early childhood programs.

This study explored the relationship between Colorado's Qualistar Rating System and process and structural dimensions of quality as measured by the ECERS. By analyzing the association between program characteristics and changes in quality as well as by assessing the transcendence of quality definitions, I also investigated how it is unifying the early care and education system.

Research questions

1. In what ways, if any, does participation in Colorado's QRIS relate to classrooms' process quality?
2. In what ways, if any, does participation in Colorado's QRIS relate to classrooms' structural quality?
3. In what ways, if any, is Colorado's QRIS impacting the emerging ECE system?

Sample

This project involved three sources of data:

1. Quantitative data from 669 classrooms that were rated by Qualistar at two time points from 2006 to 2010; data include ECERS scores and program, classroom, and teacher characteristics
2. Qualitative data from the teaching and administrative staff from 13 programs and from 7 coaches that were collected from September 2009 to March 2010
3. A questionnaire completed by stakeholders from ECE system.

Altogether, the qualitative data included the perspectives of 119 individuals

Methods

The study used mixed-methods research. The quantitative strategy involved the following components:

- Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale scores disaggregated into process and structural quality scales
- Dependent variables: (1) absolute quality, and (2) quality change
- Independent variables: Program, classroom, and teacher characteristics
- Bivariate relationships with pairwise comparisons
- Multiple linear regression

The qualitative strategy involved the following components:

- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups
- Survey with open-ended questions
- Verbatim transcripts
- Constant-comparative method and deductive coding that yielded 75 codes and used Atlas Ti

Progress Update

The analysis was completed and dissertation defended in May 2011. The results are currently being written for publication.

Findings

Process quality: Overall, the data suggested that participating programs experienced inconsistent improvements to process quality. The quantitative results indicated that process quality change was strongly associated with initial low-quality scores. Program type, accreditation status, and teachers' and directors' education type were also statistically significant. The qualitative results suggested that the greatest impact occurred in four unaffiliated early childhood centers. Staff at centers with highly qualified teachers that were affiliated with policy initiatives (i.e., Head Start or pre-kindergarten) or had high ratings reported modest or no process

quality improvements. The key factors that promoted process quality improvements were: coaching, professional development, program administrator leadership, and curriculum implementation. Several of these factors were not directly part of the QRIS improvement strategy.

Structural quality: Overall, the data indicate that programs made more substantial improvements to structural quality. The quantitative data show that structural quality improvements were associated with low-quality scores. Within the qualitative sample, respondents reported they made structural quality improvements at all sites. The key factors affecting these changes were coaching, funding, and the high stakes associated with the rating. Each element plays a large role in the QRIS quality improvement strategy.

ECE system: The data suggest that the QRIS has a modest impact on the ECE system, based on parameters outlined in new institutional theory. The first parameter is *definitional unity*: participants reported the QRIS instantiates a definition of quality but there is some disagreement with its definition. The second parameter is *legitimacy*. Participants reported a greater sense of professionalism and the structural quality improvements they made uphold institutional norms, which further bolsters field legitimacy. Concerns over the validity of the rating threaten to undermine progress related to legitimacy. The third parameter is *organizational field connections*. Participants reported that the QRIS has improved horizontal and vertical linkages but the limited scale of the QRIS reduces impact of connections and it also does not reach all system components.

Implications for policy/practice

The data suggest that QRIS can promote quality in general and have a particularly strong impact on process quality for programs with a lot of room for improvement that are unaffiliated to policy initiative (e.g., Head Start or pre-kindergarten programs). As such, the results point to continued support of QRIS with some modifications. As it exists, the QRIS is more focused on structural than process quality. Policy recommendations include adopting an assessment approach geared toward process quality. It could involve the use of one tool more focused on interactions that could transcend diverse programs

contexts or the use different tools for different types of early childhood programs. Teachers' acquisition of higher levels of formal education and participation in coaching may be positive levers for promoting greater process quality across settings. Finally, the data also indicate that QRIS need to have a broad scope and concerted efforts need to be made to address the connections between QRIS and other system components.

Implications for research

Further analysis using a longitudinal study design could explore the relationship between quality improvement strategies and specific types of quality improvements programs make. Quality improvement strategies could be examined using planned variation models and cost-benefit analyses.

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<p align="center">Key Topics</p> <p align="center">Please select all that apply and briefly describe/explain. This information will be used internally in planning the CCPRC Annual Meeting.</p>	
<p><i>Quality Frameworks</i></p> <p>How well are QRIS living up to promise of improved outcomes at the systems, provider, family and child levels? How are they influencing parent decisions, professional development, workforce issues? What are we learning about collaborative professional development strategies and effective targeting of quality resources?</p>	<p>Consider contributions of different types of quality improvement strategies and the specific impacts they have on quality.</p>
<p><i>Other (please describe)</i></p>	<p>I am also involved in two other projects related to quality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) a project for the early childhood funders collaborative assessing states needs for QRIS related TA (2) a paper for INQUIRE group that delineates the quality improvement strategies available to policymakers