

2012 PROJECT BRIEF

Quality Profiles in Early Childhood: An Example from Virginia's Quality Rating Improvement System

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Project Description

Quality in early childhood settings has emerged as an important factor in determining whether the potential benefits of educational experiences before kindergarten will be realized. Research demonstrates that in order for such interventions to be beneficial to young children's development, the quality of their educational environments and interactions must be high. States have responded by developing quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs) as a method to assess, communicate, and improve the level of quality available to children and families. Such rating systems have the potential to safeguard public investment by making programs accountable for quality, meet a consumer need for families seeking high quality care, and serve as a method to help improve the levels of quality in a variety of early childhood settings.

Across the country, states have developed QRIS programs that vary widely in terms of their structure and administration. The purpose of this study is to better understand the makeup of quality across the state of Virginia, and potential associations with the overall program ratings assigned by Virginia's QRIS. This study will examine data collected on the quality of early childhood programs participating in Virginia's QRIS to identify patterns and profiles of quality in these settings using a clustering technique. Identified profiles will be compared with the composite ratings assigned by the state to learn about the structure of Virginia's QRIS and how it associates with quality in the field.

Research Questions

- What profiles of quality exist among early childhood programs participating in Virginia's QRIS?

- Is there a relationship between identified profiles and the comprehensive quality ratings assigned by Virginia's QRIS, and if so, how do they relate?

Sample. Participants include the 346 early childhood programs who have received comprehensive quality ratings as part of Virginia's QRIS from June 2009 until June 2012.

These programs volunteered as QRIS participants in 18 diverse communities across Virginia, including urban, suburban, and rural settings. Participating programs include a variety of child care settings: small businesses, nonprofit organizations, corporate childcare, religiously affiliated or exempt programs, public pre-kindergartens, Head Start programs, accredited programs, and those accepting childcare subsidies.

Method. Early childhood programs volunteering to participate in QRIS were assessed on four components of quality, based on the structure identified by the state initiative:

1. *Teacher education and qualifications:* programs self-report on education levels, training hours over the past 12 months, and other leadership activities
2. *Ratio and group size:* programs self-report on teacher-child ratios and group size in classrooms over the period of one representative week
3. *Teacher-child interactions:* assessors trained to reliability observe randomly selected classrooms using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008)
4. *Learning environment:* assessors trained to consistency observe randomly selected classroom using the Early Childhood

Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005)

Administrators of Virginia's QRIS (Virginia Department of Social Services and Virginia Early Childhood Foundation) calculate composite quality scores and assign Star Ratings based on pre-determined cut-off scores. Some quality components (for example, teacher-child interactions) contribute relatively more points to the overall program score.

In the current project, data from the four quality components will be examined using cluster analysis to determine profiles of quality that exist in the sample of early childhood programs participating in Virginia's QRIS. These profiles will be compared to the comprehensive quality ratings assigned by the state initiative, to explain what relationship, if any, exists between profiles of quality occurring in the field and the comprehensive ratings resulting from the scoring and calculation procedures of Virginia's QRIS.

Progress Update

Data across all four quality components identified by Virginia's QRIS have been collected in 346 early childhood programs within 18 communities. These data have been recorded electronically and scored by program administrators. Composite quality ratings for all programs have been generated according to the total number of points earned across the four components, and the cut-off scores between quality levels, as defined by the initiative.

Implications for Policy/Practice

There is a significant need across the country to link QRIS structures to meaningful pictures of quality in the early childhood settings, to ensure that these rating systems are meaningfully reflecting aspects of quality as children experience them daily. This priority was identified in the Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge grant competition (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011), in which states were called upon to validate their tiered QRIS structures.

This project has the potential to help Virginia learn more about how its QRIS structure relates to profiles of quality that exist in the programs volunteering to

participate. This may have implications as the state examines potential revisions to aspects of the QRIS structure such as weighting across different components of quality and considering cut-off points between the tiers of this system.

Implications for Research

Research examining the nature of quality in early childhood often approaches the task of 'unpacking' quality into various components to better understand their relative contributions to children's learning and development. This research trend is in contrast to policy initiatives such as QRIS, which generate comprehensive ratings through calculations which consolidate features of quality into a single snapshot for use by consumers and other stakeholders.

The structure of how QRISs generate comprehensive ratings is significant; these systems are being used for high stakes purposes such as evaluation of early childhood systems and programs, as well as allocation of resources such as quality improvement funding and tiered subsidy reimbursements.

QRIS structures are not well-researched, and this project would examine one state's system for calculating comprehensive scores. This project uses a method that examines the relationship between overall ratings and the nature of quality in early childhood settings, as described by profiles generated from the same quality components, to further examine what it means to use QRIS ratings to meaningfully differentiate between levels of quality in early childhood.

For more information:

<http://www.smartbeginnings.org/Home/StarQualityInitiative/AboutStarQuality.aspx>

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