

Are Neighborhood Factors Associated with the Quality of Early Childhood Education in North Carolina?

A primary goal of North Carolina's Quality Rating Improvement System is to encourage early childhood education sites to maintain and improve their programmatic and educational quality. Because higher quality sites can better support young children's school readiness, it is important for education leaders to understand the complex factors that may be associated with better quality in early childhood education sites. Understanding the predictors of quality can help policymakers direct resources to sites in ways that can improve quality. Some prior research has shown that the geographic location and the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the neighborhood in which early childhood education sites are located may be related to their quality, but the research is limited. This study explored whether knowing more about the location of early childhood education sites and the characteristics of the neighborhood (in this case, the census tract) in which they are situated would improve understanding of the factors that contribute to the quality of early childhood education opportunities available across North Carolina.

Most early childhood education sites in North Carolina participate in the quality rating system, so ratings from that system were used as the outcomes to be explained. After the geographic location (within census tracts) of each early childhood education site was determined, analyses explored whether characteristics specific to an early childhood education site, the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the census tract in which each site was located, and the number of sites in and near each census tract helped explain each site's quality rating score.

Because teacher credentials matter for quality rating scores, the study explored whether a site's proximity to a postsecondary institution with degree or certificate programs in early childhood education was associated with a higher quality rating score for the site.

Key findings

- *High quality early childhood education sites were available in most neighborhoods throughout the state.* Center-based sites achieved higher quality rating scores than family child care home sites.
- *Neighborhood characteristics were not associated with early childhood education sites' quality rating scores, after differences in the sites themselves were accounted for.* Site participation in the school readiness subsidy program and the age range of children served by the site were associated with higher quality rating scores. Sites that served fewer age groups had higher quality rating scores, on average, than sites that served a wider range of ages.
- *The number of other early childhood education sites located within the same or adjacent neighborhoods was not associated with sites' quality rating scores, after site-level characteristics were accounted for.* The lack of association between count variables and quality rating scores may reflect the limited variability in sites' quality rating scores across neighborhoods and the likely lack of competition among early childhood education sites in neighborhoods with fewer sites and high demand.
- *Distance to the nearest postsecondary institution was not associated with quality rating scores.* Although hiring and retaining educators with higher education credentials is a key component of quality ratings, an early childhood education site's proximity to a postsecondary institution with degree or certificate programs in early childhood education was not associated with quality rating scores.