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Research Notes

Accreditation as an Alternative Pathway to Quality in QRIS

Of the 24 statewide quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), 21 include linkages to national program accreditation and 15 include accreditation status as an alternative pathway to quality at a specific level of a statewide QRIS.¹ While there is general agreement that program accreditation status is a valid measure of overall quality, little attention has been paid to the relationship between accreditation status and the threshold scores on classroom assessment tools such as the *Environment Rating Scales* (ERS: ECERS-R, ITERS-R, SACERS) and administrative assessment tools such as the *Program Administration Scale* (PAS), frequently used to determine incremental levels of program quality in QRIS.

The present study was designed to focus attention on the relationship between accreditation status and the program quality assessment scores commonly used in statewide QRIS. The study also examined what star level would have been achieved by accredited programs if the quality level was determined by assessment scores instead of accreditation status.

SAMPLE AND INSTRUMENTATION

The sample for this study was 55 center-based early childhood programs that applied for the highest star level in Illinois' Quality Counts Quality Rating System (QRS),

which requires programs to be nationally accredited and achieve a threshold score of 5.00 on the overall ERS and on the PAS.² The programs in the sample were accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (87%), the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (6%), and the National Association of Child Care Professionals (7%) and represented both for-profit (31%) and nonprofit (69%) organizations. The sample includes all accredited center-based programs that applied for Star Level 4 between January 2008 and January 2013.

At the time of the study, Illinois' Quality Counts QRS utilized a block system to determine the appropriate star level of program quality. A program was required to achieve a threshold score on the overall ERS at all four levels of the rating system and a threshold score on the PAS at Star Level 3 and Star Level 4. However, if a program was nationally accredited by a state-

approved accrediting body and met the other components of the rating system (staff qualifications and licensing status), it would receive a Star Level 3 rating without ERS or PAS assessments. Accreditation thus served as a proxy at Star Level 3 for a certain level of quality in the learning environment (overall ERS score of 4.25) and in program administration (overall PAS score of 4.25).

AVERAGE ERS AND PAS ASSESSMENT SCORES FOR ACCREDITED PROGRAMS

Table 1 summarizes the means, standard deviations, and range of scores for the ERS (combined ECERS-R, ITERS-R, and/or SACERS) and PAS for accredited Star Level 3 programs that applied for Star Level 4. Accredited programs had an average ERS score of 4.27 and an average PAS score of 4.44. As reflected in this table, however, the actual range of scores varied widely for each assessment.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Range of Scores for Accredited Star Level 3 Programs that Applied for Star Level 4 (N = 55)

| Assessment | M | SD | Possible Range | Actual Range |
|------------|------|-----|----------------|--------------|
| ERS | 4.27 | .64 | 1 - 7 | 2.34 - 5.84 |
| PAS | 4.44 | .93 | 1 - 7 | 2.38 - 6.00 |

STAR LEVEL FOR ACCREDITED PROGRAMS

Table 2 identifies what star level the accredited programs would have achieved if their accreditation status did not automatically place them at Star Level 3. At the individual program level, only 18 of the 55 programs (33%) would have achieved a Star Level 3 or Star Level 4 had their determination been based solely on their ERS and PAS assessment scores rather than accreditation status

Table 2

Frequency of Star Level Ratings Based on Assessment Scores Instead of Accreditation (N = 55)

| QRS Star Level | Number of Programs |
|----------------|--------------------|
| No Star | 2 |
| 1 Star | 3 |
| 2 Stars | 32 |
| 3 Stars | 12 |
| 4 Stars | 6 |

It is important to note that this study was limited in sample size and included only those accredited programs applying prior to January 2013 for Star Level 4, the highest star level in Illinois' Quality Counts QRS.

IMPLICATIONS

In implementing state quality rating and improvement systems, policymakers seek to increase the number of children, especially those with high

needs, enrolled in high-quality early learning programs. These statewide quality enhancement initiatives need to be cost effective and equitably administered in a wide range of early childhood settings, including centers, schools, and homes.

One cost-effective approach in the design of a QRIS framework has been to accept a program's accredited status in lieu of meeting threshold scores determined by state-funded assessors using valid and reliable program quality assessment tools. As this study demonstrates, however, accreditation status was not an accurate proxy for the majority of accredited programs that applied for a higher star level in Illinois' QRS. Two-thirds of the programs would have been placed at a lower star level ($n = 35$) or received no star level rating ($n = 2$) if their quality level was determined by their combined ERS and PAS scores instead of their accreditation status.

It is important to realize that incremental threshold scores of assessment tools and accreditation status are different measures of quality within QRIS frameworks. Programs choose and then work to achieve the standards of quality set by these particular tools or accreditation processes. Thus it may still be good policy to recognize accreditation status in lieu of achieving threshold scores on quality assessment tools. This approach acknowledges there are multiple pathways to improving program quality, recognizes the substantial investments made by

programs to improve their quality through self-study and on-site verification, and saves states the expense of conducting reliable assessments in accredited programs. In this study, across all programs, the average ERS and PAS scores for the sample did achieve the 4.25 threshold established by Illinois for Star Level 3.

There is a need for additional research relating to accreditation status in QRIS, both as a proxy for program quality assessment scores and as a proxy for continuous quality improvement. There is also a need for future research on validation of threshold scores as measures of incremental quality improvement in QRIS. Finally, various program assessment tools and national systems for program accreditation are not the same. Understanding how differences in the scope and application of quality standards and verification rigor impact program outcomes is an important research agenda.

REFERENCES

1. National Association for the Education of Young Children. (July, 2010). *Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation*. [NAEYC Public Policy Fact Sheet]. Retrieved January 23, 2013 from www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/policy/state/QRISFactSheet.pdf
2. Effective July 1, 2013, Illinois' Quality Counts QRS for center-based programs will be replaced by a new QRIS framework consisting of 15 standard areas including learning environment and program administration.

For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800.443.5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the McCormick Center's *Research Notes* is provided by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.

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