Policy levers to promote cultural competence in early childhood programs in the USA: recommendations from system specialists

Mary L. Porterfield* and Catherine Scott-Little

*Correspondence:
mlporter@uncg.edu
Human Development
and Family Studies
Department, The University
of North Carolina
at Greensboro, 248 Stone
Building, PO Box 26170,
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170,
USA

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate ways in which early childhood systems that rate and license child care programs, known as Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs), might incorporate requirements related to cultural competence into the system, including incentives, supports, and rewards for programs that foster cultural competence of the early care and education (ECE) workforce. The study employed a focus group design to consider the research problem from the vantage point of key informants such as coaches and other system staff who routinely support ECE programs to meet system requirements and to engage in quality improvement work. Three focus groups were convened, with a total of $N = 28$ participants. The meetings were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the constant comparative method. Emergent themes were noted and grouped into four categories: QRIS requirements; system alignment; ECE progrm administrator training; and ECE teacher training and technical assistance. Focus group members advocated for incorporation of system-level requirements related to cultural competence as well as program supports to ensure that ECE providers could succeed in meeting new requirements. Policy recommendations to support cultural competence development in the ECE workforce and to embed cultural competence in ECE systems are discussed.

Keywords: ECE cultural competence, Early child care policy, ECE cultural competence training

Introduction

The science of early childhood has, over the past decade or two, made significant progress in advancing our understanding of early childhood development and the key experiences needed to support optimal development (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2015). Over the same period, the USA and many nations around the globe have also seen a shift in the composition of their populations, including children (OECD 2018). The USA provides an example of the increasing diversity among children in ECE, and, at the same time, the increasing need to provide high-quality ECE services. Children of color now constitute just under 50% of the total child population in the USA (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014a). With more parents working, a growing number

of young children (birth through age six) require non-parental care; nationwide, 65% of all young children in the USA receive non-parental care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014b). Yet, as large numbers of young children of color are being cared for by persons other than their parents, 63% of teachers in formal early care and education settings are White (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment 2018). How can early childhood systems respond to both the science that suggests a need for high-quality responsive interactions (Fox et al. 2010; Joseph and Strain 2004; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000), and the demographics that suggest a multitude of racial and ethnic contexts in which caregiving relationships must be built, particularly when the teachers may not share the same cultural background as the children and families they serve? The purpose of this study was to answer that question by exploring opportunities for one state in the USA to embed policy requirements for culturally competent teaching practices in its early care and education (ECE) Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

Literature review

Quality improvement frameworks

Around the world, more and more localities, regions, and nations are establishing early childhood systems or frameworks to address the basic health and safety of early care and education settings and to improve child outcomes by enhancing the quality of care that these settings provide (OECD 2017; World Bank 2013). Across the USA, these frameworks take the shape of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS: Zaslow and Tout 2014). QRISs are increasingly used at either the state or regional level as both a policy lever to define and incentivize high-quality practices and as an intervention to support quality improvement in ECE programs. As of 2017, a total of 41 states and the District of Columbia were implementing a QRIS in the USA (The Build Initiative and Child Trends 2017). As a policy lever, QRISs establish progressively rigorous program requirements thought to be important for optimal child development, and these requirements distinguish or define different levels of ECE quality. As programs achieve higher levels in the QRIS, they are rewarded with higher ratings. Although states vary in how these ratings are assigned and rewarded, at minimum the higher ratings can be used to market the program (similar to restaurant ratings). In many states, programs with higher ratings receive other types of rewards, such as larger financial reimbursements for provision of subsidized child care. As an intervention strategy, QRISs establish the organizing framework to guide system partners, such as technical assistance and professional development purveyors, in supporting ECE programs to make improvements and earn higher ratings in the system.

Structural quality vs. process quality

Although the specifics differ from state to state, within the USA QRIS requirements generally go beyond minimum ECE program licensing requirements (i.e., health and safety requirements), and tend to focus mostly on what are known as "structural" features of quality ECE. For instance, the QRIS may have requirements in the areas of professional development for teachers and other staff; implementation of developmentally appropriate curricula; and improved teacher–child ratios, amount of space, and quantity and quality of materials (Tout et al. 2010). These structural aspects of programs are relatively

easy to measure or count, so QRIS policies often address these structural program features.

However, process-oriented aspects of quality appear to be more consequential for child outcomes (Burchinal et al. 2010), and the ECE field within the USA endorses such aspects of quality, including high-quality teacher–child interactions, through its emphasis on developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) for children birth through age eight (National Association for the Education of Young Childhood 2009). DAP focuses on responsive teacher–child relationships; child-led active learning through play; teachers' assessment and facilitation of children's learning and development; and involvement of the family in all aspects of children's learning. Teaching that is appropriate and responsive to the individual child is stressed, and teachers' cultural knowledge of the children and families they serve facilitates individualization. Some states incorporate these "process"-oriented aspects of quality into their QRIS. For instance, programs might be evaluated based on the quality of teacher–child interactions; however, most QRISs in the USA focus on structural aspects of quality such as space and materials that are easier to regulate and evaluate (Tout et al. 2010).

QRIS supports

As a result of QRIS requirements that focus on structural aspects of quality, supports that help ECE programs in meeting QRIS requirements necessarily focus on structural features of quality as well (Mitchell 2005). For instance, QRIS-related training and technical assistance (T/TA) typically emphasize the materials and physical environment requirements that will be assessed in the rating process (Tout et al. 2010). Because QRIS policies and supports drive ECE practices (Zellman and Perlman 2008), there is an inherent tension in QRIS between including requirements that will leverage improved teaching practices (process features of quality) and including requirements that can be easily monitored (structural features of quality) but may not impact teaching practices (Kirby et al. 2015).

Cultural competence

Given that culturally and individually responsive practices are a hallmark of high-quality early care and education (National Association for the Education of Young Childhood 2009; Head Start Performance Standards 2016), it stands to reason that QRIS should incorporate requirements for culturally competent practices, and incentivize as well as support programs in helping teachers make progress toward cultural competence. The Papadopoulos (2006) definition of cultural competence as a process for developing and refining the skills and attitudes necessary to work effectively with all children and families, including children and families from cultural backgrounds that are different from the teacher and/or other children in the group, provides a useful model to understand how teachers can move toward greater cultural competence. This approach defines culture broadly and includes race and ethnicity, family structure, religion, language, and other markers of group membership. Papadopoulos, Tilki, Taylor (PTT) present a model of cultural competence development (Papadopoulos 2006) for understanding how individuals develop and demonstrate cultural competence in their professional interactions with clients or students. Although much of the research that informs the PTT model

has been conducted within health-care systems (Papadopoulos 2006), the model can be used to inform the early childhood education field on the type of processes that a QRIS aimed at improving the cultural competence of the workforce might address and how to define progressively higher requirements and incentives into the QRIS. The PTT model conceptualizes cultural competence as a continual process involving four stages: cultural awareness; cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity; and cultural competence. Progression through the stages requires training, support for practice, time for reflection, and recurring feedback on growth. The following sections summarize what research has revealed regarding ECE teachers' cultural competence. Because the focal state's QRIS includes all early childhood contexts, the literature review includes evidence from studies of regular child care, public school preschool, as well as some evidence from studies conducted in primary grade settings.

Cultural competence in ECE

The PTT model can be applied within the early childhood field, offering insights into how teachers gain cultural competence. Individuals who are progressing in their cultural competence development should demonstrate skills relative to their level of progress (Papadopoulos 2006). Skills at the beginning stage are primarily inwardly focused including self-reflection to support awareness of one's own biases. The next or cultural knowledge phase of the model moves to a more outward focus including learning about other cultures and experiences (Papadopoulos 2006). Research conducted with ECE teachers in private child care settings as well as those in public pre-K and kindergarten-third grade suggests that as teachers gain greater awareness of their own culture, beliefs, and expectations, they begin to feel more comfortable and successful connecting with families and learning about families' cultures and contexts (Graue et al. 2014; Kidd et al. 2005, 2008; Summer 2014). Additional evidence from ECE and elementary settings suggests that culturally knowledgeable teachers develop a better understanding of how they pass on information about cultural differences both explicitly and obliquely, and begin to adjust their behavior and instruction accordingly (Boutte 2008; Chen et al. 2009; Ladson-Billings 1995). Teachers in ECE and elementary classrooms at this stage of cultural competence development have demonstrated their abilities to see families as partners in their children's education and adapt their teaching strategies and content to reflect the cultures of the children in the classroom (Chen et al. 2009; Ladson-Billings 1995; Maude et al. 2009).

The PTT model suggests and evidence from both ECE and elementary settings supports the concept that teachers at the next cultural competence stage demonstrate the value of children's cultures and contexts by weaving into their classrooms and pedagogical practices the knowledge they have gained from the families they serve (Chen et al. 2009; Ladson-Billings 1995). These teachers have high expectations for culturally and ethnically diverse students (Gay 2002); they understand behavior, communication, and learning from a cultural perspective (Summer 2014); and they respond from a strengths-based perspective (Graue et al. 2014). Culturally competent teachers interrogate their curricula for embedded racism and adjust their plans to eliminate it (Boutte et al. 2011), and they work to build children's knowledge of differences, privilege, and social justice and their skills to actively question and work against discrimination and bias (Boutte

2008; Ladson-Billings 1995; Milner 2003). From a policy perspective, the challenge is how to capture these teacher characteristics and processes in requirements that incentivize and reward the development and implementation of culturally competent practices and promote teachers' progress through the stages.

Supports for implementing culturally competent ECE practices

In addition to well-defined requirements related to cultural competence, practitioners need access to supports that will help them implement the practice or meet the requirements (Tarrant and Huerta 2015). Particularly at the starting point but also throughout the cultural competence journey, practitioners need training and support for cultivating awareness of their own culture, identity, beliefs, and biases, as well as skills to connect with others and address differences (Papadopoulos 2006). Even experienced teachers, including those in ECE and in public school settings, are unlikely to realize how their unconscious attitudes shape their expectations of and interactions with children of diverse backgrounds (Boutte 2008; Graue et al. 2014; Summer 2014). Teachers need guided opportunities to investigate their own cultural heritage, experiences, and beliefs about issues of privilege and social justice within a supportive context (Boutte 2008; Chen et al. 2009; Gay and Kirkland 2003; Kidd et al. 2008; Maude et al. 2009). Preservice teacher preparation programs (Groulx and Silva 2010; Kidd et al. 2008), as well as in-service professional development (training and coaching) for teachers (Gay 2002), have been effective at providing this supported, critical self-reflection that brings to light issues of both consciously and unconsciously held beliefs (including stereotypes) about self and others. The keys to supporting implementation of the desired culturally competent practices among in-service teachers appear to lie in the training and technical assistance provided to teachers. Thus, in order to explore how cultural competence can be integrated into the focal state's QRIS, it was important to tap into the experience and expertise of training, technical assistance, and system-level personnel who were familiar with the ECE teaching workforce, the current QRIS requirements, and current available supports.

Purpose of the study

The present study sought to learn, from stakeholders who provide coaching, training or technical assistance (T/TA), and other supports to the ECE workforce and system, how culturally competent teaching practices and related supports could be embedded in the focal state's QRIS. Policy requirements that the state had considered were presented to each group, and participants were asked to discuss their reactions, as well as to offer other ideas they might have for requirements and supports to help practitioners meet the requirements. The goal was to gather ideas and insights that could be presented to state-level decision-makers to inform plans for cultural competence requirements for the ECE workforce.

Method
Study design
This study employed a qualitative design, using focus groups to collect data from participants who were purposefully sampled for the perspectives within the QRIS that

they represented. Qualitative research is ideally suited to gathering insight into policy opportunities and challenges from those operating within the related system (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The focus group data collection strategy afforded the researcher the opportunity to elicit a variety of perspectives within a short period of time. Purposeful sampling of T/TA providers and ECE system experts allowed the researcher to draw on expert knowledge and participant experience relevant to the research questions and within the policy context of the QRIS.

State context

The focal state for this study is situated in the Southeastern USA, and all types of ECE programs participate in its QRIS. That is, private child care programs, family child care homes, state-sponsored pre-K programs (whether in public school or private settings), Head Start, and developmental day programs serving children with disabilities all participate in the QRIS. The state's QRIS focuses heavily on the structural elements of quality such as the quantity of materials present in each room, or items that can be easily assessed via a checklist (Cassidy et al. 2005). Process elements of quality, such as teacher–child interactions, are evaluated but do not weigh as heavily in the rating as do structural quality factors, despite the evidence that process quality is more closely tied to positive child outcomes (Burchinal et al. 2010). The focal state's QRIS was also disconnected from and did not address important interactions that support cultural competence development of teachers, engagement of families, and optimal development of children, and this conundrum inspired state-level child care policy makers to consider multiple activities in pursuit of QRIS reform (State CCDF Administrator, personal communication, August 25, 2012).

As part of this larger effort to re-imagine and revise its QRIS, the focal state had previously invested in a multi-year, multi-mode pilot project to strengthen the cultural competence of its ECE workforce. The cultural competence project featured four two-day institutes, with coaching and quality improvement work (small changes that providers tested in their programs, mainly around family engagement), occurring between institutes (Day-Hairston et al. 2015). Participants (ECE teachers, administrators, family child care home operators, parents, and coaches) also developed a 5-h introduction to cultural competence training reflecting the work they had undertaken over the period of the project. The training, which focused on the awareness level of the PTT model (Papadopoulos 2006), was piloted and refined, and coaches from the project were certified to deliver the training (Day-Hairston et al. 2015). The present study sought to tap into interest generated by this training as it engaged coaches, trainers, and other ECE system staff in discussions about cultural competence and the state's ECE system. Voices from the field therefore informed this research on the opportunities and challenges related to incorporating cultural competence in program requirements in the state's QRIS.

Role of the researcher

As a former employee of the state's ECE rating/licensing system, the primary investigator in this study is a proponent of state-level system approaches to policy development. To address this bias and give room for possible local or regional solutions, the purposeful sampling method incorporated recruitment of a mix of local, regional, and state-level

focus group participants. Care was taken to ensure that the majority of participants were not previously known to the primary investigator so that they would not feel a need to offer ideas in line with a systems implementation perspective.

Sample selection

Participants ($N=28$) were drawn from three agencies (out of a total of 14 agencies in the state) who oversee training and technical assistance, quality improvement work, and child care referral (CCR&R) across the state, and one focus group was convened at each agency. The three participating agencies serve a number of roles in the state's CCR&R system. First, they each provide direct CCR&R services in their local community. Secondly, they oversee CCR&R service delivery (i.e., services provided by other local CCR&R agencies) for their region. Finally, together they form a CCR&R management hub to provide management oversight for statewide delivery of CCR&R services. As such, each agency is responsible for CCR&R services in a number of regions across the state, and these regions are divided among the three agencies in such a way as to minimize travel and maximize diversity of urbanicity in the regions assigned to each management agency. Each agency therefore has a mix of experiences interacting with, delivering, and overseeing CCR&R services to ECE providers at the local, regional, and statewide levels and in rural, suburban, and urban settings.

The agency connected with Focus Group 1 serves (locally) a mix of rural and urban programs and is located in a suburban area of the state. Focus Group 2 was comprised of staff from the agency serving locally the most rural area (although, as mentioned, their assigned regions for CCR&R management included a mix of rural, suburban, and urban locales). Focus Group 3 involved staff from an agency serving primarily an urban location locally, with management oversight of both rural, urban, and suburban settings.

With each of the three agencies, meeting times for the focus groups were arranged through the Executive Director and were scheduled at times distinct from other agency meetings. The Executive Director was asked to invite staff with a variety of experiences in the state's ECE system (direct T/TA providers; regional staff; and system staff) and a mix of experiences with cultural competence training in order to assure a variety of perspectives would be included in the focus groups. Although the extent to which focus group participants were representative of all T/TA providers and other roles is unknown, the goal of including a variety of perspectives was achieved and, on the whole, the group appeared to reflect the variety of professionals engaged in supporting programs and teachers within the state.

All participants ($N=28$) were involved in some aspect of ECE quality improvement work and routinely considered (as part of their jobs) the question of how to improve ECE quality. At the beginning of each group, participants were asked to indicate the type of position they held, whether they had participated in some type of cultural competence training, and whether they had participated and/or led the state's cultural competence training. Table 1 presents key characteristics of each of the three focus groups. As described above, each of the three agencies represented in the focus groups coordinates services across a broad geographic area and directly provides services in a local area. Focus Group 1's agency serves primarily a suburban area, Group 2's agency serves a rural area, and Group 3 serves an urban area. Participants indicated if their primary role

Table 1 Characteristics of the focus groups

Focus group	One	Two	Three
Total participants	9	9	10
Agency urbanicity	Suburban	Rural	Urban
Participant position			
Direct T/Ta (%)	89	78	70
Region (%)	0	11	20
System (%)	11	11	10
Cultural competence training			
Yes (%)	89	78	60
No (%)	11	22	40

was working in the direct T/TA with the local community or at the regional or the state-wide service coordination level. The majority of participants in all three groups were primarily involved in providing T/TA services to the local community. Group 3 included the most representation from the regional and systems-level personnel, but it was only 30% of participants from this group. Across the three focus groups, 75% of participants ($n = 21$) had participated in some type of cultural competence training. Of those, 15 had attended and three had delivered the cultural competence awareness training described above. Group 3 included the largest proportion of participants (22%) who had not participated in cultural competence training.

A total of 21 participants returned completed surveys to provide additional information about their demographic characteristics (a response rate of 75% of the participants). Demographic survey results are provided in Table 2. Participants were generally older and had a lot of experience in the ECE field (85% reported being in the field 11 years or longer). The majority self-identified as White/European and spoke English as their primarily language.

Focus group protocol and procedure

Three focus group sessions, each approximately 90 min in duration, were held across the state. A semi-structured protocol was used to guide the progression of the meeting, with consistent questions asked in each group and follow-up questions (posed during the meetings) that varied according to the responses in the group. Follow-up or prompt questions were not prepared ahead of time but were responsive to the flow of each focus group discussion. The primary researcher provided a brief overview of the study and then asked everyone to provide their name and role. Participants were then asked one informational question and five questions that were a mix of closed and open-ended. The questions are listed below:

1. Please tell me whether you have taken or delivered training on the topic of cultural competence.
2. If you could do anything you wanted to (i.e., without consideration of the current system), what would you do or recommend to support the cultural competence of teachers and teaching practices in the classroom?

Table 2 Participant demographics

Age (years), %	
35–39	19
40–49	33
50–59	19
60+	29
Years in ECE field, %	
Less than 5	10
6–10	5
11–20	47
21+	38
Race/ethnicity, %	
Hispanic/Latino	5
Black/African	14
Multiracial	10
White/European	76
Languages spoken, %	
English	90
German	5
Spanish	5
Level of education, %	
AA or AAS	5
BA or BS	57
Graduate degree	38
Degree, %	
ECE	62
Other	38

3. What would you think about a new requirement for all ECE teachers and administrators to take the Introduction to Cultural Competence training as part of licensing or the QRIS?

4. If the introductory training were a basic requirement, what should be required at higher levels of the QRIS?

5. Would you support a licensing or QRIS requirement that every ECE program have a Cultural Competence Plan specifying how they would support cultural competence of their staff, connect with families, and reflect family social and cultural context in the program?

6. If a written Cultural Competence Plan were a basic requirement, what should be required at higher levels of the QRIS?

Participants were given the questions in advance. Questions were asked one at a time. The protocol did not ask participants to come to consensus regarding responses, but occasionally focus group members tended to work toward a consensus position on each open-ended question,

Focus group sessions were audio-recorded and field notes were taken at each session. The recordings were transcribed, and the analysis was conducted from the transcriptions and field notes. After the focus group, participants were also asked to

complete a brief online survey to provide demographic data and some information about their own experience with the cultural competence training.

Data analyses

Data analysis followed the constant comparative method (Glaser 1965, 1992; Glaser and Strauss 1967) of examination and re-examination of qualitative data to discover categories and then identify emerging themes related to the phenomenon of interest (Glaser 1965, 1992; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Although the method is frequently associated with grounded theory, qualitative studies that are more exploratory in nature benefit from this approach to identifying and categorizing emergent ideas from the data (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Each focus group transcript was examined and coded line by line for emergent topics. A total of 72 original topics were charted and analyzed for emergent connections or categories. Initial categories were then adjusted or re-conceptualized to achieve parsimony of categories across focus groups. Categories were grouped into higher-level themes, and this iterative process was repeated until no further categories or ideas emerged. Themes and categories were then charted, along with quotes that typified each category and notes about which focus group(s) emphasized each point. As a final step, each transcript was reviewed to ensure that no individual participant or possible theme was being systematically overlooked or excluded.

Because the constant comparative method relies on a researcher's conceptualization of data, it does not lend itself to a reliability check as no two researchers' conceptualizations are likely to be the same (Glaser 1992). Instead, this study employed a peer consensus process in which the coded data were reviewed by the second author, and any disagreement related to coding was discussed and resolved. An additional researcher, who has extensive experience and expertise in the constant comparative method, reviewed the proposed larger themes in relation to proposed finer-grained categories; discussed the themes' fit with the data; and together the research team agreed on the final coding.

Results

Categories and themes

As a result of the analyses, focus group comments were coded into two main groupings or themes, each with two smaller groupings or categories. The Requirements theme included two categories: QRIS Requirements and System Alignment. The first category, QRIS Requirements, comprised recommendations for QRIS requirements related to cultural competence development in the focal state's ECE programs. The second category, System Alignment, encompassed recommendations for alignment among ECE system stakeholders related to QRIS requirements. The Supports theme also yielded two categories. The first, ECE Program Administrator Training, included observations of the need for specialized training and technical assistance that address the role of the ECE program administrator as both institutional and instructional leader. This theme reflects the focus of the discussions on center-based ECE rather than home-based ECE. It is possible that this focus was due to the larger proportion of centers (69%) to homes (31%) in the focal state at the time (NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education 2016). The second category in the Supports theme, ECE Teacher Training/Technical Assistance Content, included recommendations for

Table 3 Themes, categories, and definitions

Themes	Categories	Category definitions
Requirements	QRIS requirements	Recommendations for requirements including trainings, cultural competence plans, professional development plans, family engagement, despite concerns related to monitoring and avoiding checkoffs
	System alignment	Recommendations for alignment at the ECE system level such as: specialized training and resources for T/TA community; system-wide definitions of/commitment to cultural competence; prioritizing resources and coordinating across system partners to meet needs; and viewing cultural competence as foundational to ECE quality
Supports	ECE program administrator training	Recommendations for specialized ECE program administrator training and support that acknowledge the nature of the administrator's role in setting the tone and focus of the program and provide support for their work as institutional/instructional leaders generally, and for cultural competence development and implementation of program-wide culturally competent practices in specific
	ECE teacher training/technical assistance	Recommendations for specialized training and technical assistance for the ECE workforce that accommodate varying levels of education and experience to support cultural competence development and higher-level implementation of culturally competent practices

supports that address the varying educational and experiential backgrounds of the ECE teaching workforce. Table 3 depicts the themes, their related categories, and the category definitions, and the results from the data analyses are described below, with direct quotes attributed by focus group.

Requirements theme

Participants used their own experiences within the state-level QRIS and with the cultural competency training to reflect on how the focal state might incorporate systems-level requirements, policies, and other efforts to foster cultural competence among the ECE workforce. Their comments and recommendations addressed possible QRIS requirements, as well as alignment needed at the system level in order to ensure implementation. The requirements theme was the most frequently coded of the two themes.

Require the introductory training in the QRIS

In each focus group session, participants voiced strong support for QRIS requirements that all ECE providers complete the introductory cultural competence training. This support for the training was voiced across all three groups and by all participants. The notion that requirements are needed to drive practice emerged across all three focus groups in this discussion, as highlighted in this quote from Group 2: "for some people it almost has to be a requirement, or they won't take the initiative" to attend the training. However, participants also voiced concerns that such a requirement might diminish the effectiveness of the training because it potentially would become a "checkoff" for ECE providers to complete prior to being assessed for their rating (i.e., something they do

because it is required), and not result in changes to practice. One participant from Focus Group 1 typified this concern that was expressed across focus groups:

> It would also be important to ensure that, just because we say it's going to be a rule or a reg[ulation], that you have to do it, it doesn't become, 'yeah, OK, check, we did that.' Like some centers that we all know and love and go into every day, they are getting ready for their stars [monitoring visit] and so here are some really pretty toys and then they [the toys] are gone [after the rating assessment].

This quote and much of the discussion illustrate important questions around the extent to which policy requirements can actually change practice in "process" features of quality. Participants worried that simply developing policies to require certain trainings would not result in authentic improvements in process quality within programs.

After some discussion about the alternatives, participants from each focus group concluded that the existing cultural competence training was an important introduction to the topic, and that even if it was treated by some as a "checkoff," it was a good starting point for cultural competence development, especially because the state had no requirements in this area. Support for this assertion was voiced by the majority of participants in all three groups. Participants in Focus Group 3, the group with the highest percentage of participants who had not completed cultural competence training, also advocated for the introductory training requirement to be implemented as a pre-service requirement for ECE teachers, meaning they would have to complete the training before beginning work. Weaving the training into a pre-service requirement, teacher certification, or teacher license would help to ensure an available pool of teachers who could meet the requirement.

Two concerns emerged relative to ensuring the sustainability and impact of the training. First, members in all three focus groups noted that additional trainers and a sustainable system to certify new trainers (development of a train-the-trainer module and certification process) were critically needed. Expressing a concern shared across members in each group, they noted that the state had originally developed the training and certified a group of trainers to deliver the training, but there was no ongoing mechanism to train and certify additional trainers. Second, focus group members noted that TA's would need to have time to support implementation of culturally competent practices with teachers and programs following training. They expressed frustration that TA's currently do not have such time because they are busy helping ECE programs meet the structural aspects of quality that comprise the present rating system (Cassidy et al. 2005). Focus group members (across groups) suggested a shift to a more process-oriented focus of quality in the QRIS to allow TA's to go deeper with ECE providers on cultural competence development. Illustrating comments heard in all three groups, one participant indicated "The problem is our current work with providers is very surface level TA. We talk about being culturally sensitive in terms of having books and materials [that reflect diversity] and there needs to be a deeper level of understanding about what it means (Focus Group 1)."

Require programs to develop cultural competence plans

Across focus groups, participants affirmed their support for a QRIS requirement for each ECE program to develop a program-level cultural competence plan describing their commitment to culturally competent practices and how they would evaluate and support the cultural competence development of staff. The focal state was considering this type of policy at the time of the focus group meetings. Participants across all three groups recognized that there was no existing, prescribed form, but indicated they felt the plans would have to include certain elements which could be tailored to and reflect each program's unique characteristics and circumstances (such as program philosophy, family engagement and communication policies, and professional development policies/plans). As with the training requirement discussion, focus group members voiced concerns about the cultural competence plan being treated as a "checkoff." Comments such as "The director has to have a strong understanding of what it means and not just a checklist (Focus Group 3)," characterized the discussions overall in all three groups and led to ideas about supports that would be needed for administrators to develop cultural competence plans. Participants in Focus Groups 1 and 3 suggested training wherein administrators would be supported to develop individualized plans for their programs using templates as a starting point. Administrators would then receive technical assistance to support implementation of their plans, including how to assess implementation. Both groups suggested that monitoring of the cultural competence plan (for regulatory compliance) could include review of staff professional development plans, family engagement activities, or teacher-created artifacts including "a journal or portfolio, lesson plans, photos, anything to show they are actually doing the work that is connected to the awareness (Focus Group 1)." Members in Focus Group 2 wondered what tool ECE program administrators would use to "find out where are your staff with cultural competence, what's their understanding?" Although that question was not resolved, other ideas for supporting implementation of a cultural competence plan emerged (across groups), all relating to ongoing professional development. Several participants in Focus Group 1 recommended embedding cultural competence constructs and content into all professional development including college coursework so that as one participant observed, "it is a part of anything related to developmentally appropriate practices (Focus Group 1)." Others extended the conversation by noting that embedding cultural competence into every training, college course, and coaching experience ensures that the "targeted [cultural competence] training gets reinforced because every class you go to, or training, is along the same lines (Focus Group 1)."

Recognize cultural competence as foundational to ECE program quality

Moving from specific requirements to a broader view of cultural competence in a tiered QRIS, participants discussed how to conceptualize increasing levels of quality as programs move up in the system. Participants in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 3 recommended that all programs at the entry level to the QRIS be required to have professional development plans (for all staff) specifying cultural competence content. This suggestion was affirmed in each group, with participants noting that such plans would provide

important documentary evidence needed for monitoring. Programs entering the QRIS would also be required to have a process for evaluating progress based on the professional development plan goals in order to create a continuous quality improvement process. Beyond shared support for the notion of an entry-level requirement, participants expressed more divergent ideas on additional possible requirements. In Focus Group 1, several participants recommended advanced training on the topic at higher levels of the QRIS. However, participants in Focus Group 3 struggled to conceptualize cultural competence requirements that would increase in rigor as the program rating increased, a key feature of a quality rating system. Participants in this group wondered how to "put up goalposts for what it should look like at various levels without diminishing the value of self-discovery and development and individualization." Cultural competence is a highly individualized journey, so participants wondered how a standardized policy requirement could promote authentic growth in this area. A single comment changed the direction of this discussion, as if it provided the insight that the rest of the group was casting about to find. "Because a program is at a lower [star rating] level, they shouldn't have to do less for children. We shouldn't have the least amount of cultural competence at the lowest star level." Other participants echoed the sentiment: "Children at a one-star program are no less deserving of cultural competence than children at a five-star program." Across focus groups, participants discussed ideas related to redefining pre-licensing requirements, that is, requiring some evidence of cultural competence or a commitment to cultural competence development before an ECE program could open for business. As one participant offered, "this is such a critical piece of what matters to the youngest children, that we're saying 'Open a child care center if you want, but this is what it is going to take. (Focus Group 1).'"

Support system-level cultural competence work

The final discussions in the requirements theme had to do with system-level needs across all entities in the state that provide T/TA or other supports to ECE programs. Focus group members across all three groups spoke of the need for state-level system alignment on the definition of and approach to cultural competence. As one participant noted, this alignment is crucial in terms of "Having everyone be able to say what cultural competence is, and making sure we are speaking the same language, especially because we are not under one umbrella and don't always cross-communicate (Focus Group 2)." Each group discussed the value of embedding within the system-wide definition a focus on relationship-building and family partnerships as key to cultural competence. As a member of Focus Group 2 noted, "At the core of it [cultural competence] especially in the classroom is building relationships, being open-minded, and talking with children and families. That is a definite way to become more competent and implement and embed it in the environment."

Participants in all three groups indicated they felt that with that unified, system-wide definition of cultural competence should come a commitment to cultural competence development at the level of system agencies (i.e., through policy development), and personnel. As one participant (Focus Group 3) observed, "This is a huge workforce issue—you can't support that work until you have done that work [of cultural competence development]." A unified training across the T/TA entities was proposed in each focus

group as a way to ensure sufficient resources for proposed requirements and assure an aligned approach across T/TA providers and across geographic areas in the state. Across focus groups, specialized cultural competence training and certification for all T/TA providers was seen as an integral part of any state-level effort to support cultural competence, so that they would be "equally as culturally competent as we expect those teaching staff to be (Focus Group 3)." In order for the ECE system to move toward the goal of embedding culturally competent practices in policy, then, the entities that support ECE providers should engage in the work of cultural competence development as well as specialized work around how to support such development in the ECE workforce.

Although the complex work to incorporate cultural competence requirements in the focal state's ECE system may appear to be a deterrent to progress, across all three groups focus group members were hopeful. Echoing comments heard in all groups, one member noted that the goal of culturally competent practices is not only attainable but also evident in some programs in the system:

> When you walk into a high-quality child care program, those are the programs that do a parent interview, who sit down and ask the questions, and it can be as simple as that. 'Tell me about your family, tell me about your child. Your family pictures are on our walls because we value your family, we value your child.' And those are tangible things that happen in high quality programs (Focus Group 1).

Across focus groups, participants suggested examples of current, tangible practices that could serve as guides for implementing cultural competence in the system in authentic ways. Finally, despite the many challenges related to embedding cultural competence in the focal state's ECE system, focus group members were clear in emphasizing that the work must be accomplished. Contrasting the state's current focus on structural features of quality with the benefits of potential policy changes to promote cultural competence and process features of quality, one member summed up "I think this is one of the most important things. All that other stuff, how many blocks you have [in a classroom], doesn't mean anything if you can't serve the family and the child (Focus Group 2)."

Supports theme

Participants discussed several concerns around implementing QRIS requirements related to cultural competence in ECE programs. From these discussions, two categories about supports for implementing new requirements emerged: specialized T/TA for ECE program administrators; and specialized T/TA for ECE teachers. Discussions of these categories acknowledged both the strengths that these groups bring to their work and the specialized needs they have due to varying levels of education and experience.

Administrators need specialized supports

As participants began to consider how cultural competence development of the ECE workforce might be supported (generally), they quickly focused on the ECE program administrator's role in guiding and "setting the tone for" ECE centers. Across focus groups, participants made clear their belief that program administrators would play a key role in any changes to staff practices. Highly skilled and visionary leaders would have

the capacity to support implementation, whereas less skilled administrators might stand in the way of change. As one participant noted:

> *If everyone thinks about where directors are—we have directors [administrators] who do not even know how to run a business. So, if you're thinking about managing staff, HR [human resources], budgeting, etc., we can't just tell them to develop a philosophy and a cultural competence plan if they can't deal with something like staff conflict. We really don't support leadership development or business management for site directors (Focus Group 2).*

Focus group members in each group felt that administrators needed training that was more tailored to their roles as program leaders: "It [the training] may need to be different for directors than for teachers because they're coming at it from a different aspect, I mean administrative-wise, what they need to do as far as setting the standard (Focus Group 3)." Another participant observed: "We know that directors really guide the quality of child care programs, so it could be an option that maybe directors would have to take a more intense training than what staff would have to take (Focus Group 3)." A specialized training track to support leadership development and administrators' cultural competence journey as well as to equip them to support those of their teachers was widely supported across focus groups.

Teachers need specialized supports

Participants in each group also raised concerns about the capacity of ECE teachers to benefit from the introductory training offered previously, particularly given the low levels of education typical of ECE teachers. As one participant in Focus Group 3 noted, "For some people, for the level of education they have, I don't see it being enough to have the [introduction to cultural competence] course. We've had people who can't look beyond themselves."

Participants in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 3 recommended lengthening the training beyond 5 h and embedding it into a community college course because "there's not enough time to process the change that needs to happen to internalize and be able to implement it in the classroom beyond just 'well I'm told I need to do this (Focus Group 1).'" Another recommendation (across groups) was to provide targeted TA related to implementing culturally competent practices as a follow-up to training on the topic. Focus Group 3 members also suggested cultural competence training for programs (as a whole) or for teacher/administrator pairs as a way to build capacity for implementation. Finally, focus group members (across groups) recommended specialized training for T/TA providers to support their flexibility in meeting the varying needs of training participants: "to ensure that you have folks facilitating that can handle those (Focus Group 3)" different situations that arise due to differing teacher backgrounds and experiences.

Discussion

The goal of a QRIS or other early childhood accountability framework is to promote high-quality practices that benefit children and their families. Although structural features of ECE quality are easier to regulate and evaluate, process features may be the most important in terms of promoting better outcomes for children (Tout et al. 2010). Herein

lies a significant challenge for policy makers who make decisions about QRIS (or other early childhood system) requirements, and quality enhancement specialists charged with the important task of supporting implementation of such requirements. Focus group members clearly had a view of ECE quality as reflected in processes in ECE classrooms and in the interactions between administrators, teachers, children, and families, rather than in the structural features currently emphasized in their state's QRIS. In fact, underlying all focus group discussions was the notion that process- and relationship-based culturally competent practices are foundational to high-quality ECE in general and should be encouraged and rewarded through policy changes (requirements) at the system level. This study echoes and extends the focus in the literature on the importance of ensuring culturally competent ECE practices such as teachers having high expectations for all children in their classrooms (Gay 2002); viewing children and families from a strengths-based perspective (Graue et al. 2014); and connecting with children and families in order to inform necessary practice changes (Kidd et al. 2005).

The idea that culturally competent practices are the least we should expect from ECE programs (i.e., for children in programs at all levels of the rating system) portends a substantial shift in the focal state's ECE system from one that monitors and recognizes mostly structural aspects of quality to one that incentivizes and rewards more process-oriented elements of ECE program quality. Programs will enact the practices that are required (Tarrant and Huerta 2015; Zellman and Perlman 2008), so it is important for ECE systems to establish requirements, resources, measures, and monitoring systems that encompass the complexities of process quality in general and culturally competent practices specifically (Kirby et al. 2015).

Further complicating the effort to implement QRIS requirements that promote cultural competence is the observation from participants that the development of cultural competence is a highly individualized process that progresses over time. Focus group discussions aligned with the PTT model (Papadopoulos 2006) and related literature (Groulx and Silva 2010; Kidd et al. 2008; Milner 2003; West-Olatunji et al. 2008), in highlighting the time and resources necessary to support personal and system-level growth from a level of awareness to a level of cultural competence. It remains to be seen whether requirements and resources implemented at a system or program level can effectively move individual teachers and programs toward greater cultural competence. Can this type of process-oriented growth be promoted effectively through requirements in a QRIS or other early childhood system framework?

Focus group participants emphasized the important role that administrators play in shaping the quality of their program and promoting growth among their staff. They stressed that policies and resources should be tailored to support administrators in their special roles in order for programs to make progress toward cultural competency. These observations extend the literature around the role that program administrators play in ensuring program quality (Lower and Cassidy 2007). For the participants, the policy implications are clear: in order to advance and sustain ECE program quality and cultural competence, the system should focus its requirements on program administrators and provide the specialized supports that administrators need to develop effective leadership and management skills (Ackerman 2008; Talan et al. 2014) and to implement culturally competent practices (Derman-Sparks et al. 2015).

Finally, participants indicated that progress in promoting program- and individual-level cultural competence and high-quality process features is shaped by the extent to which there is a cohesive approach at the system level. Requirements communicate system priorities, and practices that are evaluated for system-level compliance are often viewed by practitioners as the definition of quality that must be met and maintained (Tarrant and Huerta 2015). Without a common definition of cultural competence and coordinated work to develop cultural competence across system partner agencies (such as those who provide T/TA), ECE providers will likely lack the supports necessary to successfully meet QRIS requirements related to culturally competent practices within their programs. Systems-level work is needed first in order to effectively promote cultural competence growth across system agencies, ECE program administrators, and the ECE workforce.

Strengths and limitations

Results from this study can be used by policy makers to guide decisions about how to conceptualize and implement requirements and supports for process features of quality, such as cultural competence, in QRIS and other early childhood frameworks for quality improvement. The qualitative methodology provided insights from stakeholders who are engaged in supporting quality improvements within the focal state. One of the strengths of the constant comparative method is that it is designed to discover the story behind the data (Glaser 1992). This study utilized the constant comparative method to discern, from voices that are largely absent from state-level decision-making, the challenges and opportunities they see relative to incorporating cultural competence in the state's ECE policies and system. The composition of the focus groups was a strength in itself, with both training and technical assistance practitioner-level, regional-level, and state-level perspectives represented. The focus groups highlighted system-level challenges related to the goal of embedding cultural competence in the state's ECE policies and system, as well as program or practitioner-level strengths and opportunities that might guide future implementation.

A primary limitation is the generalizability of the study. First, the focus groups included participants from only one state. Globally, countries have taken different approaches to define requirements and incentives for higher quality care (OECD 2017; World Bank 2013). Within the USA, state QRIS vary considerably from one another (Zaslow and Tout 2014). Therefore, drawing upon data from focus groups conducted within just one state means that the results may or may not generalize beyond the focus state. The small sample size is another factor that limits the generalizability of the results. Although the focus groups represented a diversity of viewpoints from the training and technical assistance world, the sample included only 28 participants.

A second limitation is the selective group who were targeted in the study—training and technical assistance providers. Although this stakeholder group is intimately involved in implementing supports for the QRIS requirements, they are certainly not the only stakeholder group within the system. Voices of classroom teachers, program administrators, and family child care home operators need to be added to the discussion to provide a more complete picture of how cultural competence might be embedded into this state's QRIS. Policy makers and others responsible for establishing requirements and funding

supports should also be included. Although the study has elicited data from an important stakeholder group, it is limited in terms of the perspectives represented.

An additional limitation is the methodology used for data analyses. The constant comparative method does not lend itself to reliability checks and so relies on the researcher's disciplined approach to coding in order to avoid a biased interpretation of the data (Glaser 1992). Although efforts were made to check interpretations and assumptions through peer consensus, the results are necessarily a product of the researchers' own point of view in organizing and analyzing the focus group transcripts.

Implications and recommendations

In a comprehensive review of the literature on children's learning and early childhood provider professional development, the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015) indicated that the ability to work with diverse children and their families is one of the core competencies that ECE teachers should demonstrate. Furthermore, the report recommended steps that can be taken at the policy and practice level to strengthen support for ECE teachers to develop the recommended competencies. The results of this study point to implications for ECE programs and systems, important steps that can be taken to strengthen cultural competence in ECE programs. First, participants in this study emphasized their viewpoint that without requirements specifying that they must do so, most ECE providers would not attend training on or implement culturally responsive practices. Requirements drive practice (Zellman and Perlman 2008). QRIS decision-makers must therefore carefully identify the practices that matter most for optimal child and family outcomes, and incorporate requirements related to the desired practices into the QRIS. As noted above, the need to incorporate process-oriented features of quality care in ECE requirements has been recognized, but implementing process-oriented requirements is challenging. The Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework (USHHS 2018) is one example of how process-oriented family engagement practices can be codified and supported. The Framework provides operational definitions for key processes, specifies standards/recommendations for program practices in various areas to support the family and community engagement process, and describes expected family and child outcomes. This type of framework is needed to support the development of process-oriented requirements that participants called for in the present study.

Next, the portrait of ECE program administrators emerging from this study may suggest a new policy focus. ECE program administrators control not just the climate of the program but the classroom practices, teacher access to professional development, and the like. Sustainable implementation of high-quality classroom practices must necessarily be supported from the top. As QRIS determine which practices they will incentivize and reward through requirements, they must also consider how to require, incentivize, and support program administrators to facilitate implementation in the classrooms they oversee.

Finally, for states, systems, and countries wrestling with the question of how best to evaluate ECE program quality, perhaps the time has come to invest in new measures that assess process aspects of quality at the administrative (program) level and at the

classroom level and avoid the problem of more structural quality measures that incentivize performance only for the day of assessment (Tarrant and Huerta 2015).

In addition, these results should guide further efforts to consider changes to the focal state's ECE system. First, there was unanimous support for the development of training modules related to the cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence levels of the PTT model (Papadopoulos 2006). Second, members advocated requiring all ECE providers to take the awareness training. Despite potential implications for resourcing the training, such a requirement might be a good starting point for transitioning to more substantial changes (i.e., to a process-oriented rating system), including sorting through system alignment relative to cultural competence. Family engagement was proposed by participants as a good starting point for culturally competent practices, and perhaps this would be a realistic and attainable next step in terms of incorporating practice-related requirements into the system. Finally, the state should investigate ways to transition to a more process-oriented rating system for ECE programs, one that aligns all ECE partners and systems in the work of sustained and sustainable high-quality practices for all children and families.

In summary, we recommend steps be taken to create requirements and incentives related to cultural competence within QRIS. The requirements and incentives could be for training of individual teachers, preparation for administrators to support cultural competence, and program-level policies that support culturally competent practices. Furthermore, resources should be allocated to develop training, technical assistance, and other supports to strengthen cultural competence within all levels of the QRIS, including TA Providers, policy makers, program administrators, and teachers.

Finally, additional measures and other strategies should be developed to help programs and the QRIS as a whole evaluate progress toward culturally competent programs and systems. These changes would require that states prioritize culturally responsive caregiving as a key aspect of quality and invest resources in training and other supports. Careful planning would be needed to ensure that teachers and other staff who receive training are not overburdened nor expected to absorb the costs of the training (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). In addition, states might need to reinvest resources currently dedicated to evaluating and supporting structural features of quality to instead be used to evaluate and support process-oriented aspects of quality, including but not limited to cultural competence. Research suggests that in order for QRIS to promote improvement in the quality of ECE services that will make a difference in child outcomes, the evaluation and ratings that programs receive must accurately reflect aspects of quality that are important for children's development (Burchinal et al. 2010). Investments in supporting teachers' and programs' ability to promote culturally competent practices would be worth the investment (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018).

Future research

This study also points to ideas that can then be tested in future studies. First, can an ECE rating system focused on process elements of quality result in improved ECE practices generally and culturally competent practices in specific? Research focusing on

understanding the process aspects of ECE quality and how they could be implemented, measured, and rated, might be an important next step. Second, could such a rating system focused on process quality elements compel (or free) the larger ECE system to align its resources to better support culturally competent programs and teachers? Studies that identify and define the supportive resources (e.g., technical assistance and training) provided by each ECE system agency might facilitate alignment of such resources to better meet needs. Third, can tangible requirements such as training, cultural competence plans, and professional development plans permit ECE systems to monitor, evaluate, and rate process-oriented practices? At the program level, concrete mechanisms such as these may be needed to facilitate teachers' abilities to connect with and integrate families' stories and contexts in their classrooms in meaningful ways, as well as to support administrators to evaluate and support teachers in this work. Finally, what could other stakeholder groups add to the conversation? Additional research including stakeholders who are not training and technical assistance providers is needed. Focus groups should be conducted with teachers, administrators, family child care home providers and policy makers to provide a comprehensive look at how cultural competence requirements and supports could be added to a QRIS.

Conclusion

Results from these focus groups indicate ample energy and interest among key stakeholders to reform the focal state's early care and education system in order to address the most fundamental aspects of quality and to align the ratings (what is counted) with what is most important (what counts) for children and families to thrive in this state. Policies and resources are needed to invest in the capacity of administrators and teachers to implement culturally competent practices; careful consideration should be given to the content of professional development designed to improve the capacity of the workforce; and steps should be taken at the systems level to ensure a cohesive approach to regulating and promoting culturally competent practices.

References

Ackerman, D. J. (2008). Coaching as part of a pilot quality rating scale initiative: Challenges to-and supports for-the change-making process. *Early Childhood Research & Practice, 10,* 1–21.

Boutte, G. S. (2008). Beyond the illusion of diversity: How early childhood teachers can promote social justice. *The Social Studies, 99,* 165–173.

Boutte, G. S., Lopez-Robertson, J., & Powers-Costello, E. (2011). Moving beyond colorblindness in early childhood classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 39,* 335–342.

Burchinal, M., Vandergrift, N., Pianta, R., & Mashburn, A. (2010). Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low-income children in pre-kindergarten programs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 25,* 166–176.

Cassidy, D. J., Hestenes, L. L., Hansen, J. K., Hegde, A., Shim, J., & Hestenes, S. (2005). Revisiting the two faces of child care quality: Structure and process. *Early Education and Development, 16,* 505–520.

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2018). *Early Childhood Workforce Index 2018.* [PDF Document]. http://cscce.berkeley.edu/files/2018/06/2-About-the-Workforce.pdf.

Chen, D. W., Nimmo, J., & Fraser, H. (2009). Becoming a culturally responsive early childhood educator: A tool to support reflection by teachers embarking on the anti-bias journey. *Multicultural Perspectives, 11,* 101–106.

Day-Hairston, B., Pemberton, K., and Kennedy, B. (2015). Winston-Salem State University Cultural Competence Breakthrough Series Collaborative Final Report. Retrieved January 3, 2018, from http://earlylearningchallenge.nc.gov/sites/default/files/Activity%2013.1%20WSSU%20FINAL%20Report-%20Cultural%20Competence%20December%2031,%202015.pdf.

Derman-Sparks, L., LeeKeenan, D., & Nimmo, J. (2015). *Leading anti-bias early childhood programs: A guide for change.* NY: Teachers College Press.

Fox, S. E., Levitt, P., & Nelson, C. A., III. (2010). How the Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Influence the Development of Brain Architecture. *Child Development, 81,* 28–40.

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53,* 106–116.

Gay, G., & Kirkland, K. (2003). Developing consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education. *Theory Into Practice, 42,* 181–187.

Glaser, B. G. (1965). The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis. *Social Problems, 12,* 436–445.

Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Emergence vs forcing: Basics of grounded theory analysis.* Mill Valley: Sociology Press.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co.

Graue, E., Whyte, K., & Delaney, K. K. (2014). Fostering culturally and developmentally responsive teaching through improvisational practice. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 35,* 297–317.

Groulx, J. G., & Silva, C. (2010). Evaluating the development of culturally relevant teaching. *Multicultural Perspectives, 12,* 3–9.

Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation.* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/19401.

Joseph, G., & Strain, P. (2004). Building positive relationships with young children. *Young Exceptional Children, 7,* 21–28.

Kidd, J. K., Sánchez, S. Y., & Thorp, E. K. (2005). Cracking the challenge of changing dispositions: Changing hearts and minds through stories, narratives, and direct cultural Interactions. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 26,* 347–359.

Kidd, J. K., Sánchez, S. Y., & Thorp, E. K. (2008). Defining moments: Developing culturally responsive dispositions and teaching practices in early childhood preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 24,* 316–329.

Kirby, G., Caronongan, P., Malone, L. M., & Boller, K. (2015). What do quality rating levels mean? Examining the implementation of QRIS ratings to inform validation. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 30,* 291–305.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice, 34,* 159–165.

Lower, J. K., & Cassidy, D. J. (2007). Child care work environments: The relationship with learning environments. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 22,* 189–204.

Maude, S. P., Hodges, L. N., Brotherson, M. J., Hughes-Belding, K., Peck, N., Weigel, C., et al. (2009). Critical reflections on working with diverse families: Culturally responsive professional development strategies for early childhood and early childhood special educators. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners, 12,* 38–53.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Milner, H. R. (2003). Reflection, racial competence, and critical pedagogy: How do we prepare pre-service teachers to pose tough questions? *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 6,* 193–208.

Mitchell, A. W. (2005). *Stair steps to quality: A guide for states and communities developing quality rating systems for early care and education.* [PDF Document]. Alexandria, VA: UnitedWay of America, Success by 6. Retrieved January 5, 2018, from http://www.earlychildhoodfinance.org/downloads/2005/MitchStairSteps_2005.pdf.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children Birth Through Age 8.* [PDF Document]. Retrieved March 10, 2018, from https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/PSDAP.pdf.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *Transforming the financing of early care and education.* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/24984.

NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education (2016). *Child Care Analysis Detail from 04/01/16 to 04/30/16.* [PDF Document]. https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Portals/0/documents/pdf/S/statistical_detail_report_april_2016.pdf?ver=2017-05-16-110309-663.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2017). Key OECD indicators on early childhood education and care. *Starting Strong, OECD Publications, Paris.*. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264276116-en.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2018). *Engaging young children: Lessons from research about quality in early childhood education and care*. Paris: Starting Strong, OECD Publications. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en.

Papadopoulos, I. (2006). The Papadopoulos, Tilki and Taylor model of developing cultural competence. In I. Papadopoulos (Ed.), *Trans-cultural health and social care: Development of culturally competent practitioners* (pp. 7–24). Edinburgh: Elsevier.

QRIS Advisory Committee (2012). *The North Carolina Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Advisory Committee Executive Summary.* [PDF Document]. https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Portals/0/documents/pdf/Q/QRIS-Advisory-Committee-Executive-Summary.pdf.

Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Summer, M. (2014). "You are a racist": An early childhood educator's racialized awakening. *The Social Studies, 105,* 193–200.

Talan, T. N., Bloom, P. J., & Kelton, R. E. (2014). Building the leadership capacity of early childhood directors: An evaluation of a leadership development model. *Early Childhood Research & Practice, 16,* 1–2.

Tarrant, K., & Huerta, L. A. (2015). Substantive or symbolic stars: Quality rating and improvement systems through a new institutional lens. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly: Part B, 30,* 327–338.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014a). KIDS COUNT Data Center. Retrieved September 10, 2017, from http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/8446-child-population-by-race-and-age-group?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/35/false/869,36,868,867,133/68,69,67,12,70,66,71,13|/17077,17078.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014b). KIDS COUNT Data Center. Retrieved September 10, 2017, from http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=35&loct=2#detailed/2/35/false/869,36,868,867,133/any/11472,11473.

The Build Initiative and Child Trends. (2017). A Catalog and Comparison of Quality Initiatives [Data System]. Retrieved March 10, 2018, from http://qualitycompendium.org/.

Tout, K., Starr, R., Soli, M., Moodie, S., Kirby, G., and Boller, K. (2010). *Compendium of quality rating systems and evaluations.* Prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Washington, DC: Child Trends. Retrieved January 5, 2018, from https://qualitycompendium.org/.

United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement. (2018). *Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved October 19, 2019, from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/pfce-framework.pdf.

West-Olatunji, C., Behar-Horenstein, L., & Rant, J. (2008). Mediated lesson study, collaborative learning, and cultural competence among early childhood educators. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 23,* 96–108.

World Bank. (2013). *What matters most for early childhood development: A framework paper.* Working Paper Series No 5, January 2013. Washington DC, USA: World Bank. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/359991468331202884/pdf/901830NWP0no5000Box385307B00PUBLIC0.pdf.

Zaslow, M., and Tout, K. (2014). *Reviewing and clarifying goals, outcomes and levels of implementation: Toward the next generation of quality rating and improvement systems* (QRIS) (OPRE Research Brief). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved January 3, 2018, from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/qris_conceptual_framework.pdf.

Zellman, G. L., & Perlman, M. (2008). *Child-care quality rating and improvement systems in five pioneer states: Implementation issues and lessons learned*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.