ON-SITE APPROACHES TO QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS: BUILDING ON THE RESEARCH ON COACHING

On-Site Approaches to Quality Improvement in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Building on the Research on Coaching

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Introduction

There are multiple indications that different forms of on-site technical assistance aimed at improving quality are being widely implemented as part of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). For example, coaching with teachers and caregivers to improve the learning environment and practices with young children is emerging as a central element within QRIS. The use of coaching in QRIS (and other quality improvement initiatives) reflects emerging evidence that in order to translate what is learned through professional development into high-quality practices in work with young children, early educators need the opportunity to see examples of specific practices being implemented in everyday settings by skilled role models and to implement these practices themselves with supportive feedback.

While the research on coaching is a foundation that can be built upon in QRIS efforts, this research is, in some ways, at an early stage of development, and lacks elements that would be informative for QRIS. In addition, on-site quality improvement efforts within QRIS include but go beyond a focus on practices of individual teachers and caregivers to encompass issues such as improvement of program administration and management, understanding of the QRIS and the rating process, and navigation of forms and paperwork. Yet, the existing research on early childhood program quality improvement strategies typically addresses coaching and consultation[1] approaches that focus on practices with individual teachers and caregivers (and, less often, program administrators).

Consideration of the ways in which the research on coaching is both a match and a mismatch with on-site quality improvement efforts within QRIS stands to strengthen the research on coaching by pointing to ways in which extensions of this literature are needed (Zaslow, Tout & Isner, 2011). At the same time, such consideration will help identify needed areas of research focusing on on-site quality improvement within QRIS that go beyond coaching. The purposes of this research brief are twofold: (1) to describe the foundational role of the existing research on coaching for on-site quality improvement efforts within QRIS, while at the same time identifying ways in which extensions of this research are needed to be informative for QRIS, and (2) to identify on-site quality improvement activities and approaches that occur within QRIS that go beyond coaching with individual teachers and caregivers, suggesting the kinds of systematic research on these approaches that would be informative for QRIS. The brief concludes by suggesting that a multi-level approach to quality improvement in QRIS is needed to build an understanding of the interconnections between effective quality improvement strategies at a classroom or group level, at a whole program level, and at the level of the system.

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[1] For simplicity, we refer to coaching research in this brief. However, consultation is also used in early childhood programs as a quality improvement strategy. Depending on the initiative, the activities used by coaches and consultants may look very similar.

Definitions: Coaching and other On-Site Quality Improvement Activities

At present, researchers, policymakers and practitioners use terms such as technical assistance, mentoring, coaching and consultation in varying and often imprecise ways. A literature review conducted by researchers from Child Trends (Isner et al., 2011; Tout, Isner & Zaslow, 2011) found inconsistency across studies in the terminology used to describe on-site quality improvement (QI) approaches. The lack of definitional agreement and clarity creates an obstacle to aggregating research findings. It is also possible that the imprecise use of terms may result in the implementation of approaches that are not well-suited for meeting the desired goal.

Recent work by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) takes important steps towards using terminology intentionally and consistently. NAEYC and NACCRRA (2011) propose defining *technical assistance* as an umbrella term for a range of individualized QI approaches. They then suggest distinctions in the definitions of mentoring, coaching, and consultation according to the relative roles and seniority of the provider and recipient of support, and the goals of the support. While readers should consult the full definitions, key elements of the differences across the definitions proposed by NAEYC and NACCRRA include that:

- Coaching is provided by someone with specific expertise working with an early educator on implementing specific practices;

- Mentoring is provided by someone more senior in the same role, working over a period of time to guide the overall professional development of an early educator;

- Consultation involves joint problem-solving focusing on a specific issue.

In order to build the body of research on on-site quality improvement approaches, it will be important to agree upon and use such key distinctions with consistency. Explicit reference to these definitions will help researchers, practitioners and policymakers clarify the effort they are considering, its goals, and the roles involved.

Because the discussion in this brief focuses on QRIS, the term "on-site quality improvement" (on-site QI) is used to describe the variety of services offered to practitioners to assist them in meeting and improving on the quality indicators included in the QRIS. This term is roughly equivalent to the term "technical assistance" proposed by NAEYC/NACRRA and reflects the fact that QRIS use different technical assistance providers for a range of purposes related to program quality improvement.

We use the term "coaching" very specifically to discuss approaches aimed at helping early educators implement specific practices in working directly with young children within classrooms or home-based groups. These practices involve direct interactions with children, implementation of curricula, and structuring of routines and the physical environment in the immediate setting of care and education. Coaching involves someone with expertise in the specified practices working directly with an early educator on implementation of these practices. While in most instances this is accomplished in the early educators' daily work setting, some coaching approaches use videotapes of the early educator's work in the classroom or home-based group that are shared with the coach and feedback is provided through electronic communication. It is important to note that, referring to the NAEYC/NACCRRA definitions described above, some efforts defined in previous research as "consultation" would be included in "coaching" as it has been defined for this brief.

Coaching as Part of Federal and State Quality Improvement Efforts

There are multiple indications from federally-sponsored and state initiatives for early care and education that coaching is viewed as holding potential for improving quality and is being widely implemented. For example, at the federal level:

- 131 Head Start and Early Head Start grantees in 48 states and the District of Columbia recently received funding through the Early Learning Mentor Coaching initiative to improve early childhood teaching practices through on-site professional development approaches involving a combination of mentoring and coaching. An evaluation of this initiative is being conducted (Howard et al., 2012).

- Head Start has also launched a new National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. Among the goals of the new center are to develop, implement, and evaluate a coaching and mentoring system that includes a continuum of coaching approaches.

- The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has funded multiple evaluations of coaching approaches. These have been conducted in both center-based and home-based care and examine impacts on improving quality and child outcomes. Among these are the Quality Interventions for Early Care and Education (QUINCE) Evaluation, (described in greater detail below), Project Upgrade (Layzer, Layzer, Goodson, & Price, 2009) and the Evaluation of Child Care Subsidy Strategies: Massachusetts Family Child Care Study (Collins et al., 2010).

- Over a period of years, the US Department of Education funded projects across the country aimed at increasing access to high-quality professional development for early educators working in low-income areas. The projects, called the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development (ECEPD) projects, were required to put in place evaluations examining whether they did in fact broaden access to high-quality professional development for those working with young children in low-income neighborhoods and whether the approaches to professional development they explored had positive effects on the practices of early educators and on children's school readiness. These projects were essentially laboratories for implementing and evaluating approaches to strengthen professional development beyond what was already available to early educators serving low-income families and children. A cross-site evaluation of the 18 local projects put in place across the country between 2003 and 2005 found that all 18 were using coaching (Tout, Halle, Zaslow & Starr, 2009). In all cases, the coaching was paired with a complementary "knowledge-based" approach (for example, training or college coursework).

Documentation of the approaches used in state and local QRIS points to widespread reliance on on-site QI approaches. These QI approaches appear to include coaching in addition to other technical assistance strategies. For example, the Compendium of Quality Rating Systems and Evaluations (the Compendium), which provides profiles of 26 state and local QRIS, documents that all 26 profiled include on-site assistance (Tout et al., 2010). A study focusing on 17 statewide QRIS similarly found on-site quality improvement approaches being implemented in each state (Smith, Schneider & Kreader, 2010). Interviews conducted with directors of QRIS document that these on-site QI efforts include coaching (see, for example, the results of the in-depth interviews with directors and staff of local QRIS conducted by Isner et al., 2011). However, as will be discussed in greater detail later in this brief, the on-site quality improvement approaches go beyond coaching on specific practices. They include also helping early educators understand the requirements of their state or local QRIS, providing an orientation to the observational measure used as part of the QRIS, working to make sure that program directors understand the kinds of written documentation the QRIS calls for, helping directors apply for funding available through the QRIS for professional development or improvements on structural features of quality, and working with programs to prepare for and understand the QRIS ratings. As an illustration of these additional on-site QI activities, 14 of the 18 QRIS that reported on the content of their on-site assistance in the Compendium, referred to "navigation" of the QRIS as a key focus, which included assistance with filling out paperwork and an explanation of the rating process (Tout et al., 2010).

With QRIS frequently incorporating coaching, it is appropriate to turn to the research on coaching to inform QRIS. However, with on-site QI efforts as part of QRIS also going beyond coaching, it will be important to identify the kinds of additional research that will be needed to inform QRIS in the future.

Evidence on the Effects of Coaching

A Review of Research

A recently conducted review of research on coaching (Isner et al., 2011; Tout, Isner & Zaslow, 2011) found evidence from evaluation studies that such approaches, when aimed at improving quality in the individual early childhood classroom or home-based group, often do improve early educator practice, child outcomes, or both. However, the review also found that improvements to quality and child outcomes are not universal in such programs.

Isner and colleagues (2011) identified 44 studies examining the effects of coaching in early childhood settings that were either published in a peer reviewed journal or a government report. Fifteen of the studies involved random assignment to "business as usual" or to professional development that included coaching;

the remaining studies looked at change over time after the implementation of a new coaching approach or compared groups that did and did not get the approach (without randomly assigning participants). While in 16 of the studies the goal of the coaching was improvement of overall or global quality, the goal in the majority of studies was to improve quality and child outcomes in a specific domain, such as language and literacy. The studies were conducted in the full range of early childhood settings, with most involving center-based care and fewer (nine) conducted in home-based care settings. The coaching involved a range of activities, including building relationships with the early educators, conducting an initial assessment of quality, setting goals for quality improvement and developing a written quality improvement plan, modeling positive practices, providing feedback on the early educators' practices, engaging in discussions to reflect on changes in practice, and facilitating the formation of communities of practice.

This review found evidence of statistically significant positive effects on both early educator practice within the classroom or home-based group and on direct assessments of children's development in a majority of the studies that considered each. More specifically:

- 33 of the 44 studies included measures of early educator practice, generally assessed through observational measures of quality. Of these 33 studies, 27 (87%) found evidence of positive effects on observed quality.

- 21 of the 44 studies included assessments of children's development. Of these, 16 (76%) found positive effects on child outcomes. Twelve found positive language and literacy outcomes, six found positive outcomes on measures of behavioral development, and one found positive outcomes on math skills.

We note that this review did not conduct a meta-analysis. The review is an initial examination of the evidence, asking whether there were statistically significant effects on at least some of the designated outcomes of interest rather than an examination of the magnitude and consistency of effects overall. Isner and colleagues (2011) conclude that there is promising initial evidence that coaching approaches can have positive effects. However, not all evaluated programs showed evidence of improvements through coaching. The review notes that it will become increasingly important, as this body of work moves forward, to be able to distinguish which coaching approaches are and are not effective (Isner et al., 2011).

Hypotheses Regarding Coaching Features and Underlying Processes

The published literature, as reviewed by Isner and colleagues (2011), provides a limited basis for distinguishing between coaching approaches that do and do not show evidence of positive effects. This is because the research to date includes only minimal specification of the features of the coaching models and the processes or activities in which they engage in order to improve quality. For example, Isner and colleagues (2011) note that:

- Only 5 of the 44 published studies permitted an examination of specific features of the approach used, for example, by systematically varying a feature, such as dosage of coaching. Indeed only half of the studies provided information on dosage at all.

- Few studies provided sufficient detail to determine if the coaching model was based on a specific theoretical framework.

- While coaching activities were briefly described, there was insufficient detail about activities such that an approach could be replicated in another location. Information was lacking on features like how coaches were selected, prepared, supported and supervised; how a quality improvement plan was developed; or how time was allocated to specific activities (like modeling positive practices versus observing the early educator and providing feedback) when coaching was occurring on-site.

- While many studies involved complementing coaching with coursework or group training, little information was provided on how the content and focus of these were aligned or coordinated.

Articles and reports focusing on coaching seem to be missing a special subsection of the "methods" section providing sufficient detail on the approach itself to permit replication.[2] The cross-site evaluation of the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development program (Tout et al., 2009), described briefly above, provided an unusual opportunity to document the features characterizing different coaching approaches. For this study, interviews were conducted with project directors to ask about the kinds of details that are often missing in published reports. The cross-site evaluation conducted exploratory analysis to document whether studies showing evidence of positive effects on early educator practice and/or child outcomes had coaching approaches that tended to include specific features.

In each of the 18 ECEPD projects, the coaching approach was part of a broader strategy of professional development that also included coursework or group training. A review of the project evaluations determined that 10 met articulated criteria for rigor in evaluation design and sufficiently detailed reporting on measures used and results (see Tout et al., 2009, for a summary of these criteria; we note that the 8 excluded studies may have had insufficient detail to pursue further examination rather than a methodological limitation). Of the 10 projects for which the evaluations met the criteria for rigor in design and reporting, 8 reported evidence of positive effects on observed practice in the classroom or home-based group, child outcomes, or both. This is a similar picture overall to the conclusion of the review conducted by Isner and colleagues (2011): Coaching can be positively linked to changes in quality and children's development. However, not all coaching approaches are effective.

The review of project documents and interviews with directors for the Cross-site Evaluation of the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development projects (Tout et al., 2009) indicated that projects that met the criteria for rigor and also showed positive effects tended to have these characteristics:

- *A clearly specified approach or model.* These models incorporated clear goals in terms of the facets of quality and the child outcomes the coaching approach was seeking to improve. While general goals were set, the programs used models that made the assumption that individual early educators would need support varying in focus and amount.

- *Explicit procedures for selection and preparation of staff.* Those serving as coaches in these programs generally had at least a college degree and in many instances more advanced education, as well as experience working in early childhood programs. Coaches also received initial training on the specific model.

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[2] Alternatively, Aber (personal communication, April 13, 2011) has indicated that it would be useful to move towards agreement on an appendix that would accompany each study of coaching and be structured to include headings for descriptions of such features like staff preparation to provide the coaching, supervision of coaches, and allocation of time to specific activities. In addition, projects could specify whether quality improvement goals are co-determined by the coach and the early educator or pre-determined by the coach, whether the focus is on improving global quality or a specific domain of quality, and how group coursework or training is coordinated with coaching.

- *Ongoing support and monitoring of coaches.* Opportunities were given for coaches to meet with each other to reflect on their experiences. Such supportive experiences were balanced with monitoring through activity logs for on-site visits and sometimes also observations of coaching by supervisors, as well as assessments of progress through observations of quality.

- *Tight linkages between knowledge-focused professional development (through group coursework or training) and practice-focused professional development (through coaching).* In the effective programs, the content of group learning by early educators was closely linked with the focus of the on-site practice-focused work provided through coaching. There was also communication between the staff providing the coursework or training and those providing the coaching to coordinate focus. It was sometimes even the case that the same staff member provided both elements to assure tight coordination.

- *Dosage appropriate for the goals.* There was substantial variation in the duration and intensity of the coaching provided by effective programs, but dosage appeared to fit with the goals of the coaching model. Longer duration and greater frequency occurred in coaching models focusing on more facets of quality.

Consideration of Hypothesized Features in Further Research

Other evaluation studies provide an opportunity to further examine this initial hypothesized set of features of effective on-site quality improvement programs. One noteworthy example is the evaluation of the Partnerships for Inclusion Model (PFI; Palsha & Wesley, 1998; Wesley & Buysse, 2005), an on-site consultation model tested in a rigorous experimental evaluation in the Quality Interventions for Early Care and Education (QUINCE) Evaluation (Bryant et al., 2009). The PFI model is identified as a consultation rather than coaching model because it involved joint problem-solving by an early educator and an on-site consultant (as in the NAEYC/NACCRRA definitions). In the QUINCE evaluation, this model involved the consultant training the early educator to conduct quality observation of her own setting using the Environment Rating Scales. This in turn formed the basis for joint goal setting and work towards quality improvement goals.

Of particular importance in the current context, the QUINCE Evaluation contrasted PFI not with a no-treatment control, but with a group receiving ongoing consultation through Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies in five states. The "business as usual" contrast involved much more variable on-site quality improvement approaches. PFI is a carefully defined model with specified initial and ongoing training and procedures for assessment of fidelity (Wesley et al., 2010). In contrast, while some of the approaches used on an ongoing basis in the control group were specified models with carefully monitored implementation, this was not usually the case. This evaluation therefore provides a contrast of the relative effectiveness of more and less clearly specified models, more and less tightly controlled staff training, and more and less clearly specified supervision and monitoring (the first three features noted in the bulleted list above). Data from the evaluation shed light on the final bullet above regarding hypothesized features of effective on-site quality improvement approaches: the PFI treatment group had significantly greater dosage, measured by number of on-site visits, than in the business as usual control group. The QUINCE Evaluation thus provides an opportunity to consider an approach with nearly all of the features listed above except the feature of tight linkages between coursework or training and the on-site quality improvement approach (as the PFI model does not involve coursework or training).

The evaluation considered impacts on quality and on the attitudes of early educators separately in home-based and center-based child care settings. In home-based care, quality improvements were greater in the PFI group than the control group on observed measures of teaching and interaction, provisions for learning, and practices to promote literacy/numeracy. Effect sizes were moderate and differences were found to continue six months after the intervention. No differences were found for attitudes. In center-based care, group differences favoring the PFI group emerged on attitudinal measures but not on observed quality. Teachers in the PFI group showed greater gains on professional motivation and modernity of childrearing beliefs.

This summary of findings from the QUINCE Evaluation demonstrates how a rubric can be used for considering the features of on-site quality improvement approaches. It is important to note that while the PFI model had most of the features hypothesized described above to characterize effective on-site coaching approaches, the evaluation could not consider and test each of these features separately. Rather, they were considered as a set. An important next step for research will be new work that intentionally varies and tests the specific features of programs to more fully isolate those that are associated with positive effects.

Complementing the focus on features or components of effective coaching programs, in-depth examination is needed of specific strategies used by coaches and engaged in by programs (for example, assessment of quality and goal setting, modeling of positive practices, provision of feedback, opportunities for reflection) to identify the processes underlying positive effects (Sheridan, 2009; Zaslow, 2009). It will be critical to progress from the question of "Whether coaching approaches can result in positive changes in practice and child outcomes" to the question of "Which features and underlying processes involved in coaching approaches are central to making progress towards higher quality and improved school readiness?"

Going Beyond Coaching: On-Site Quality Improvement Approaches within QRIS

QRIS provide an important context for shifting to a multi-level perspective on quality improvement approaches. While a body of research exists on coaching approaches as implemented in individual classrooms or home-based groups, there are only a small number of studies aimed at understanding what approaches can bring about improvements to whole programs (as when a program works to progress to a higher QRIS rating through coaching efforts), and how coaching approaches can be implemented with fidelity throughout an early childhood system such as a QRIS. New research also documents that on-site QI as implemented in QRIS includes coaching as one strategy to promote quality improvement but also includes other types of technical assistance for programs. In this section, we describe what has been learned from two studies that explored the range of on-site QI approaches used in QRIS and the implications of this work for new research and perspectives on quality improvement in QRIS.

A Contrast of Coaching in the Research Literature and On-site Quality Improvement in QRIS

In addition to a literature review on coaching, the study by Child Trends (Isner et al., 2011) provided case studies of four county-level and pilot QRIS, focusing specifically on coaching and other quality improvement efforts. This study involved interviews not only with administrators of the QRIS and directors of the quality improvement services within the QRIS, but also interviews with those directly providing the coaching and other individualized quality improvement approaches.[3]

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[3] The study used the term coaching for simplicity but noted that it was used to refer to the array of quality improvement approaches recorded in the multi-case study.

Isner and colleagues (2011) found on-site quality improvement (QI) efforts conducted as part of county-level or pilot QRIS to differ from coaching within classrooms or groups as summarized in the research literature in a number of ways. When conducted in the context of QRIS, on-site QI efforts were more likely to work with programs over a long duration (sometimes indefinitely); to have smaller caseloads than reported in the research literature; and to focus on inter-staff dynamics within a program rather than only dynamics within individual classrooms. In addition, in contrast to the approaches described in the literature review, the on-site QI in QRIS is rarely linked to coursework or training aimed at increasing knowledge; in these sites it focused directly on changing practices in the classroom or group.

In some QRIS, multiple on-site QI staff are deployed to a program (for example, a "resource specialist" who assists with navigation of the QRIS including the completion of forms and the quality binder and a "consultant" who assists the program with learning the environment rating scales and making changes to the environment). Staff work with programs for different purposes and may come from different agencies which can increase the complexity of managing and training staff in the field (Isner et al., 2011).

The study by Isner and colleagues (2011) found program-level quality improvement work as part of QRIS to involve different phases, including preparing for the quality rating, facilitating the rating process, and following up on an initial rating to improve it. There was a tendency to begin with easily addressed "quick technical fixes" and then to move on to more in-depth work with programs (a strategy consistent with the consultation model described by Wesley and Buysse, 2005, which was the basis for the on-site QI used in two of the QRIS included in the multi-state study). In each QRIS, the on-site QI staff worked with programs to develop a quality improvement plan. The plans focused on the Environment Rating Scales or implementation of a specific curriculum. The on-site QI staff in the four QRIS examined in the study worked both with program directors and teachers (with the emphasis in two of the QRIS on work with directors and in the other two QRIS on work with teachers).

Currently, there is limited research on on-site QI efforts addressed to directors/program administrators and this is an important issue to emerge from this study (for an exception, see a description of best practices in NAEYC accreditation facilitation: Means & Pepper, 2010). The Isner and colleagues (2011) study also notes that maintaining consistency in a particular approach for quality improvement involves particular challenges when on-site QI occurs throughout a QRIS because of the geographical dispersion of programs, the fact that support is provided for a longer duration, and because multiple agencies may contribute staff to the initiative. In addition, the QRIS included in the multi-case study generally lacked a manual or set of materials to guide staff in their work. And, while on-site QI staff had *supports* readily available to them (especially in terms of getting together with other staff to discuss issues), *supervision* was much less common, with only two sites directly observing on-site QI work as part of supervision and only one of the four sites tracking the fidelity of implementation of a model. Written feedback was provided only rarely.

A Focus on Systems as well as Programs

Clearly, research is needed to examine effective approaches to working with directors as well as individual teachers within programs; where to target efforts across the multiple classrooms of a program; and how to address relationships among staff members within a program appropriately. At a systems level, there is a need to assure that on-site QI, when it occurs system-wide, is adhering to a common approach, even when that approach includes multiple on-site QI staff working to provide individualized services to programs. Isner et al. (2011) recommend that at the systems level, QRIS should select a model of on-site QI that aligns well with the emphases of the QRIS, provide consistent supervision as well as support for on-site QI staff, and develop a manual for the on-site QI work. They recommend that such a manual should include:

- descriptions of the on-site QI model's underlying philosophy and research base,

- the activities to be undertaken,

- knowledge and skills expected of on-site QI staff,

- the dosage and intensity that are planned for visits to sites,

- the supervision as well as support that on-site QI staff will receive,

- the procedures that will be followed to document on-site QI activities, and

- a description of how fidelity to the model will be measured.

The fact that staff from multiple agencies may be employed to implement on-site QI within a QRIS – and multiple approaches may be used within a QRIS – underscores the importance of a clearly identified model and use of a manual.

A second study which focused on statewide QRIS by Smith and colleagues (Smith, Schneider & Kreader, 2010) also found that on-site approaches to quality improvement encompass but go beyond coaching. This study involved interviews with administrators of 17 statewide QRIS as well as the director of quality improvement efforts for these states.

Smith and colleagues found that on-site quality improvement teams for state QRIS aimed both to help programs prepare for their ratings and then later to work to improve them. The type of assistance most often provided to programs was discussion with directors and teachers on how to improve quality (reported as occurring frequently by 82%). Informants also reported that in a majority of statewide QRIS (59%), quality improvement frequently involved observing and providing feedback. However, modeling of positive practices was reported as occurring frequently by informants in only 35% of the participating states. Fewer than half of the states (41%) reported using a formal guide for quality improvement efforts. Most states (59%) reported that on-site visits occurred monthly or less often.

The on-site quality improvement efforts described by Smith and colleagues (2010) encompass activities that fall within the rubric of coaching (such as observing, providing feedback, and modeling positive practices). However the activities described also go beyond coaching approaches, for example including discussions with directors as well as with teachers to help them prepare for the quality ratings. Smith et al. (2010) express concern that some of the key activities of coaching (such as modeling) are not happening intensively enough within QRIS. Perhaps this reflects the fact that multiple QI approaches are occurring, some involving coaching and some not.

The two research studies described in this section suggest parallels between the work on on-site QI in QRIS and best practices in accreditation facilitation (Means & Pepper, 2010). Supporting programs in working towards accreditation requires the provision of support to the program administrator, an orientation to the details of the requirements for accreditation and how to document progress towards them, developing an overall quality improvement plan, and helping programs to prepare appropriate documentation. Given that accreditation is an anchor point for ratings in many QRIS, it is not surprising that the quality improvement activities described in on-site QI efforts for QRIS appear similar to the provision of guidance to programs on accreditation.

In summary, the context of QRIS calls for an extension of the body of research on coaching to focus on such issues as effective approaches to working with program directors and across multiple classrooms on improving quality. The body of research also needs to be extended to focus on system-wide practices for preparation, selection, supervision and monitoring of on-site QI staff, selection and adherence to a particular model, system-wide data collection on QI activities, and, ultimately, the effectiveness of the combination of QI approaches being used in QRIS for supporting improvements in quality and children's development.

As a next step, it would be extremely useful to take the more differentiated definitions proposed by NAEYC and NACCRRA for technical assistance and apply them to the on-site QI efforts occurring within QRIS. Such work could help us identify when on-site QI work involves coaching (as well as consultation and mentoring as defined by NAEYC/NACCRRA) addressed to individual classrooms or home-based groups, and multi-classroom programs. But such work could also explicitly document other QI efforts as making sure that directors and early educators understand QRIS indicators; working with them to assure that they provide appropriate written documentation for specific rating indicators; developing QI plans that include but go beyond caregiving and teaching practices to include, for example, indicators reflecting parent engagement; informing directors of resources that could help address requirements for staff education or credentials; and helping directors access resources for improving the overall physical environment. Continuing efforts to describing the full range and package of activities involved in on-site QI within QRIS will be necessary for research documenting the combination of such activities that help programs progress in terms of QRIS ratings.

Next Steps in Moving to a Multi-Level Perspective on Quality Improvement:

Issues at the level of the classroom or group. There are strengths, but also clear limitations, to the evidence base that QRIS efforts have to build on when conducting on-site QI activities. The evidence is encouraging that coaching can have positive impacts on early educator practices with children and on the children's development. Yet the research indicates that not all coaching approaches are effective. It will be important to move towards an understanding of the features (e.g., dosage, preparation and supervision of providers), and of the processes, (e.g., modeling and provision of feedback) that underlie effective coaching programs.

Issues at the program level. In addition, research on coaching to date has focused very heavily on the level of the classroom or group. The early childhood field needs to extend the focus to consider how coaching and other on-site QI activities can be most effective within whole programs. There is a particular need to consider what approaches are effective in working with directors as well as with early educators working immediately to teach and care for young children.

Issues at the systems level. Turning to the systems level, it will be important to clarify the highest priority for focus in QI efforts and the degree to which QI efforts are aligned across different QRIS standards. A recent study in Washington State (Boller et al., 2010) found, for example, that coaching had a significant impact on improved scores on the Environment Rating Scales, yet programs did not improve their QRIS overall ratings because changes were not observed on other components of the rating. This example highlights the importance of looking across QI efforts in a QRIS to identify areas of the rating that are not sufficiently aligned with an appropriate or effective improvement strategy.

Finally, the field needs a body of work to guide systems-level approaches, considering such issues as system-wide standards for selection, preparation and supervision of coaching staff, and approaches to support adherence to a specific coaching model throughout a QRIS (Tout, Isner & Zaslow, 2011). Future research to characterize the critical elements of QI infrastructure, as well as to identify the options for developing effective packages of on-site QI activities in QRIS, will provide critical information to QRIS administrators as they develop and refine their approaches to quality improvement.

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