Build

Strong Foundations For Our Youngest Children

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are a method to assess, improve and convey the quality of early learning programs. By communicating the quality of programs, parents are empowered to be savvy consumers of early care and education programs and program funders are provided assurances regarding the effectiveness of their investments. QRIS assessments also offer providers a roadmap for quality improvement with technical assistance and professional development linked to the standards measured.

In fact, QRIS are designed to be powerful tools that shape provider practices and the professional development and quality improvement supports available based on what are considered important aspects of quality measured in the rating. With the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of children in early learning programs, it is critical to understand the value that QRIS place on how well these programs provide culturally and linguistically responsive programming.

In this issue brief we discuss:

- Why it is important to include cultural and linguistic responsiveness and anti-bias programming as aspects of early learning quality;

- A content-analysis of common QRIS components with respect to how they include issues of diversity and support for English-language learners;

- How states have included these issues in QRIS planning and development; and

- Recommendations for how states can strengthen their QRIS rating components to be more culturally and linguistically competent and relevant.

Quality Rating & ★★★★ Improvement Systems
for a Multi-Ethnic Society

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Introduction – Culture, Gender, Race, and Language Aspects of Quality ● ● ●

Both brain and child development research are clear that some of the most important things young children need to learn before school-age are empathy, respect for others, and a sense of who they are in the context of those different from them – by race, gender, language, and culture. Ideally, children are learning how to practice basic democratic values of equality, sharing, and participation. Young children also are learning differences between their home culture and the culture of the community and how to navigate among these. Unfortunately, children also can acquire prejudices about others from either their home or community environments, including early care and education settings.

While not the only aspect of quality, a central aspect of quality in early care and education is how programs address fundamental issues of race, gender, language, and culture.

Quality early childhood programs help children learn about themselves and others, gain empathy and respect and help children learn about differences in race, gender, language, and culture. Quality programs include intentional anti-bias work to counter any prejudicial attitudes or experiences that children encounter, expose children to racial, gender, cultural, and language differences and to exploring the diverse world around them in ways that foster respect for and value of both diversity and children's rights. Early care and education programs cannot compromise on fundamental values of equality and social justice even if there are different thoughts about what that might mean across cultures. Early care and education must focus on developing programs, processes and professionals able to effectively and

sensitively negotiate the fault lines of culture, race, language, gender and social class so that they help all children develop optimally.

Another aspect of quality in early care and education programs is facilitating dual or multiple language learning.

Research also is clear on the value of learning two or more languages at an early age. This not only helps children become fluent in multiple languages; it also supports executive brain functioning that helps children discipline and organize their actions. All children in the United States need to develop proficiency in speaking and reading English as they proceed through the early elementary grades. Research shows, however, that, for young children, the foundation for English proficiency is to acquire fluency and a rich vocabulary in at least one language; this first language can be a home language and might not be English. Dual language learning in the early years ought to be a central value of child development. Policies that support this are a hallmark of a high quality early learning program.

Children are born learning, and children are eager to learn about languages other than their own. Quality early care and education programs that only serve English-speaking children introduce other languages into their teaching and play activities.

Quality early care and education programs that only serve English-speaking children introduce other languages into their teaching and play activities. Quality programs that serve only English-language learners strengthen the home language while beginning the process of English language learning. Quality programs that serve children who are English-language learners as well as English-only children build upon the assets of having children and families speaking other languages at home in developing both teaching and play opportunities that involve these other languages. This also facilitates the inclusion of children who are learning English into overall activities with their peers, creating opportunities for them to be leaders and sharers of their own knowledge and skills. Children are born learning, and children are eager to learn about languages other than their own. Another aspect of quality in early care and education programs is facilitating dual or multiple language learning.

The Role of Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) in Promoting Quality in Early Childhood Programs ● ● ●

Many states have or are developing quality rating and improvement systems that provide a rating structure for early care and education programs (usually centers and homes as well as Head Start and sometimes pre-kindergarten programs) on a scale of points or stars. Initially, one of the rationales for creating such a rating system was that it would provide information to parents about a program's overall quality, much like hotel or restaurant ratings. Parents would seek higher quality programs and provide a strong market force for centers and homes to improve the quality ratings of their care.

Increasingly, states are viewing QRIS as a mechanism to engage centers and family child care homes in training and staff development activities and curricula implementation linked to rating components with the goal of overall improvement in the care and education provided. Incentives are often used to encourage participation.

QRIS generally seek to be simple to administer. While all states vary in their measurement approach, all include metrics of teacher qualifications, most include a global measure of classroom quality examining the physical environment, health and safety practices, materials and activities, teacher interactions and daily program structure and some include measures of leadership, classroom ratios and how well programs partner with families. These are all important aspects of quality, but they do not necessarily include particular aspects of quality related to race, gender, language, and culture that have been described above.
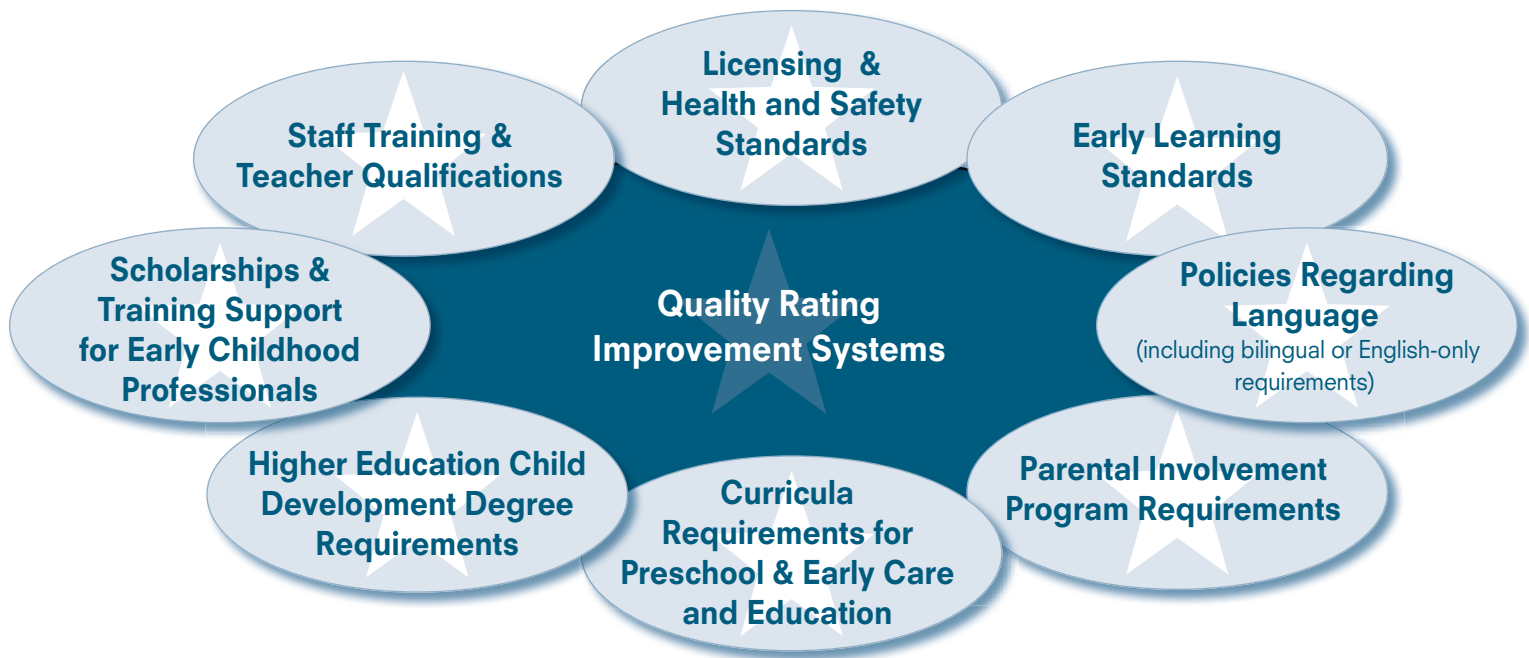
As states develop QRIS, they need to ensure that these systems are part of an overall set of policies, regulations, and practices that supports quality and gives express attention to issues of race, language, and culture. A review of a state's QRIS is one step in developing a quality early childhood system that is responsive to issues of race, gender, language and culture.[1]

[1] Matthews, H. (2008), *Supporting a Diverse and Culturally Competent Workforce: Charting Progress for Babies in Child Care Research-Based Rationale*, part of the Charting Progress for Babies in Child Care Series published by the Center for Law and Social Policy, provides an excellent framework and set of recommendations for this broader conversation and definition of quality, of which QRIS is one piece. CLASP has also released their own specific recommendations for QRIS domains in a presentation titled, *Incorporating Cultural Competence in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems*. Both CLASP pieces are available at www.childcareandearlyed.clasp.org

QRIS in Context ● ● ●

As states mature in their QRIS development and implementation, QRIS are increasingly being seen as a framework for a larger early childhood system. Within this framework, QRIS define program/classroom quality and align these standards of quality to other system components. A QRIS can serve as a powerful driver of needed improvements in professional development, quality improvement interventions and funding for early care and education. These and other state and community policies and practices can be aligned with the quality standards contained within a QRIS, promoting broader systemic changes along with improvements in program quality. Therefore, ensuring that QRIS place value on including issues of race, language and culture has importance to the cultural and language responsiveness of the larger system. The graphic below illustrates our conceptual framework in which quality rating and improvement systems need to link with, influence and incorporate all the other quality improvement elements. All must be developed in ways that ensure they are culturally responsive, language appropriate, and provide access to children from multi-cultural and multi-lingual communities. This can best be achieved with strong, ongoing involvement of parents and community members in their design and implementation.

Staff Training & Teacher Qualifications

Licensing & Health and Safety Standards

Early Learning Standards

Scholarships & Training Support for Early Childhood Professionals

Quality Rating Improvement Systems

Policies Regarding Language (including bilingual or English-only requirements)

Higher Education Child Development Degree Requirements

Curricula Requirements for Preschool & Early Care and Education

Parental Involvement Program Requirements

The figure is adapted from Antonia Lopez's PowerPoint presentation made at the National BUILD meeting, October 2008. See Constructing Culturally Competent Systems for English Language Learners: An Issue of Quality at http://www.buildinitiative.org/content/diversity-and-equity.

The Current Status of State QRIS's in Promoting Quality from a Race, Culture, and Language Perspective ● ● ●

In 2008, Child and Family Policy Center (CFPC) staff, working with faculty at the Erikson Institute, reviewed the 16 existing state QRIS systems (CO, DC, IA, IL, IN, KY, MD, MT, NH, NM, NC, OH, OK, PA, TN, VT) and conducted interviews with individuals within these states who had participated in their development. The purpose of these reviews and interviews was to determine:

- the degree to which current QRIS employed by states incorporate quality measures related to race, culture, and language;
- the extent to which any such measures were explored in the development of the QRIS; and
- the questions and concerns that incorporating specific quality measures related to race, language, and culture into QRIS might raise.

Current references within QRIS systems to race, language and culture.

Staff conducted a careful content scan of each of the 16 QRIS currently in place, looking for any items within the systems that addressed (even peripherally) race, language, or culture and for which programs might receive or fail to receive points or stars as a result.

While all states have a set of rating components or subscales within their QRIS, no state has yet established a specific component or subscale in its definition of quality early childhood settings. Such a rating component or subscale would address how well programs: support English Language Learners and children from diverse cultures and how well they foster an appreciation of race, language, culture and gender differences.

Only New Mexico, Indiana, and Pennsylvania provide any explicit mention of language, culture, or race within components or subscales of their QRIS. New Mexico's has the most explicit references, and those are shown in the box on the following page:

> **...no state has yet established a specific component or subscale in its definition of quality early childhood settings.**

New Mexico "Aim High" QRIS References to Language, Culture, and Race ● ● ●

Introductory paragraph references:

Staff Professional Development Component: "Well-prepared teachers advocate for quality in early childhood programs and take advantage of opportunities to improve competence, both for personal and professional growth and for the benefit of New Mexico's culturally diverse children and families."

Environment Component: "The environment represents New Mexico's diverse languages and cultures."

Rating Subcomponents at Different Star Levels:

2 Star Rating Component: ★ ★
- Environment:
  - o Positive examples of racial and cultural diversity should be represented in materials, equipment, and classroom displays.

3 Star Rating Component: ★ ★ ★
- Curriculum and Assessment of Children's Progress
  - o Assessments should be linguistically appropriate, recognizing that to some extent all assessments are measures of language. Assessment results are easily confounded by language proficiency, especially for children who come from home backgrounds with limited exposure to English. Each child's first- and second-language development should be taken into account when determining appropriate assessment models and in interpreting the meaning of assessment results.

4 Star Rating Component: ★ ★ ★ ★
- Curriculum and Assessment of Children's Progress
  - o Evidence that each child's language and culture are integral components of the daily program.

Almost all state QRIS incorporate some classroom observation of quality or accreditation standards in their scoring rubric. State QRIS most commonly use Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) and NAEYC accreditation as part of their rating systems; all of these take into account some dimensions of classroom quality related to supporting appreciation of race, culture, language and gender differences in their rating structures.

The Child and Family Policy Center's content scan of these rating and accreditation systems found the following results. The NAEYC accreditation standards are the most comprehensive in addressing issues of language, race, and ethnicity, particularly in the family involvement component for accreditation. However, in most state rating systems, NAEYC accreditation is considered the top level of quality and only applies to less than one-fifth of all center-based programs in the country. The ERS, which is more frequently administered, includes a number of references to language, race, and culture. For example, one of the eight indicators under the "Activities" subscale on the ECERS-R is explicitly about promoting acceptance of diversity, and 10 of the 43 indicators within the ECERS-R have some reference to race, language, and culture.

At the same time, the collective weight or value of the importance of standards related to supporting English-Language Learners and children from diverse cultures or creating an environment that values differences is relatively small in the ERS. Under the most conservative estimate, a classroom could score 6.12 out of 7 on the ECERS-R and not meet any of the quality indicators related to culture and language. This classroom would yield the highest rating on the "learning environment" component on every state's QRIS. If ERS and NAEYC standards related to supporting dual language learners and fostering an appreciation of differences are truly important, they must be included more purposefully as required components of a QRIS.

When examining other QRIS components related to staffing patterns and staff competencies, no QRIS awarded points for:

- Bi-lingualism or home language speaking capacity of teachers;
- Specific formal education requirements related to multicultural education, bi-lingual education, or the social and developmental contexts of diverse children or;
- Professional development or training requirements related to implementing an anti-bias curriculum or counteracting stereotyping and discrimination that can manifest itself within children, their families and in providers.

Overall, the current status of state QRIS is that they simply do not include significant culturally- and linguistically-competent responses to race, language, and culture as an aspect of program quality.

Views from the Field in Developing QRIS.
Staff conducted interviews in each of the 16 states with individuals who participated, and often were leaders, in developing their state systems. These respondents often indicated that these issues had simply not been a given explicit attention or discussion in their state's development process.

Interviews unearthed a great deal of confusion about what was desirable. Some respondents indicated that their goal had been "cultural neutrality" rather than "multi-culturalism." One respondent indicated that she had contacted the developers of a classroom observation tool and had been told that these tools are "culturally neutral." Some were mindful of a political context of strong support for English language acquisition and proficiency as a primary task for the educational system.

Others indicated that they relied upon ERS or NAEYC Accreditation to address issues of inclusion and diversity. In addition, state respondents often indicated that they did not have a great deal of knowledge about research related to language, culture, and quality. Few had information about the relationship between inclusion, cultural competence, equity and maintaining quality programs.

Overall, respondents were receptive to re-examining their QRIS to refine and improve upon them to be more responsive to issues of culture, language, and race. Doing so would require:
• Establishing a process that would bring expertise together that could reach some consensus across diverse groups in their state;
• Maintaining simplicity in the overall QRIS for ease of administration; and
• Ensuring accuracy and connections to an evidence base in any elements that were added or modified.

Opportunities for QRIS to Address Diversity and Multi-Culturalism ● ● ●

As interest in QRIS grows, it is important that program "quality" not be seen as separate and distinct from "quality of recognition and response to race, culture and language." While not the only component of quality, cultural and language competence and relevance needs to be a core component of QRIS. Also, program quality must be linked to how early childhood programs support children's capacities to treat all others with decency, fairness and respect.

The chart on the next page offers a starting list of elements of program quality that could be a good basis for discussing and then establishing consensus on elements that should be incorporated into a QRIS.

"...cultural and language competence and relevance needs to be a core component of QRIS. "

Elements of Program Quality Related to Language, and Culture ● ● ●

Multi-culturalism	• Materials and resources expose children to different cultures in a positive light • Curricula and activities provide children opportunities to learn about different cultures with an eye toward tolerance and empathy
Gender	• Materials and resources expose children to different images of the possibilities of boys and girls, e.g., non-traditional images of work • Teacher communicate positive and supportive messages that challenge gender stereotypes
Language development	• The home language of children and their parents is valued and treated as an asset in the child's language development • Children are exposed to other languages • Dual language learning opportunities are provided on-site • Teachers communicate in positive and supportive ways with children in the children's home language
Family involvement	• Parents, relatives and extended family are welcomed and their traditions respected • Staff understand and respond to family roles in different cultures and seek to minimize dissonance between home and program settings • Family involvement is encouraged, including sharing of culture and language with staff and other families • All program materials are available to families in their first language and in varied formats e.g., newsletters, audio tapes, DVDs, text messages, voicemail. • Programs provide ample opportunities for families from different communities and circumstances to know one another and work together for the benefit of their children
Anti-bias	• Staff is trained, supportive, and skilled in responding to children's emerging culture/race/gender identity and navigation within a multi-cultural society • Staff are trained, supportive, and skilled in responding to and countering racial, gender, or cultural biases or prejudicial actions that occur • Programs cultivate diversity within their staff in relation to all aspects of diversity • Program anti-bias policies and procedures are written and available to families in their home languages

Both process and product are important in strengthening state QRIS to reflect elements related to how well early learning classrooms support an environment that develops children's positive language, culture, race, and gender identities. The broader the range of stakeholders who are enlisted to review the QRIS from a language, cultural, racial, and gender perspective, the more understanding and support for changes there will be. Since it is probable that providers shape their practices based on standards in QRIS, the more a QRIS reflects the importance of race, culture, language and gender issues, the more programs themselves consciously will seek to respond to them. And, the more programs that already are responsive to and value diversity see that QRIS values their work, the more they are likely to value the QRIS implementers' thinking about other quality improvements they can make. Additionally, since QRIS are an important driver of larger system reform, the more emphasis placed on creating multicultural and cultural responsive classrooms, the more likely formal education and in-service professional development systems will respond by including them in their curriculum.

The perfect should not be the enemy of the good. QRIS's today are not perfect in what they try to measure, but they are stimulating actions within programs to change and improve practice. We need to measure what we treasure. Adding a specific component related to language, culture, race, and gender could further thinking and practice and influence other system elements. Such a QRIS component could be as simple as that provided on the next page:

> **" The perfect should not be the enemy of the good. "**

QRIS Multicultural Component

1-3 points	Materials, stories, pictures, and resources reflect different cultures and races and genders in a positive way (1); daily activities involve exposure to different cultures and to examples of both male and female leadership and diverse family structure (2); purposeful curriculum aimed at promoting appreciation of diversity and/or social justice (3)
1-3 points	Staff greet English language-learning children and their parents in the home language and encourage home language development (1) at least one staff communicates with English language-learning children in their home language (2) at least one person in each classroom who is bi-lingual in the dominant second language represented in the classroom (3)
1-3 points	Staff receive an orientation to and on-going training in responding to children from different languages and cultural backgrounds and responding to situations where racial, cultural, or gender bias is displayed (1); staff has received training on multi-culturalism and creating a classroom environment that can address signs of racial bias when it occurs (2); at least half the staff has taken at least one formal college class in multicultural, bi-lingual education or a relevant course (3)* ** Having these in a QRIS would help develop related training programs and opportunities within Child Care Resource and Referral Systems and community college child development programs.*

This example is for illustration purposes. It should show, however, that the task of creating some elements within QRIS to reflect diversity is not overwhelming. It is doable and it is needed if QRIS are to improve the quality of early childhood programs for all children.

Note: The content scan of state QRIS is available on the Build website (www.buildinitaitive.org) along with other policy briefs in this series.

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The BUILD Initiative helps states create comprehensive early childhood systems – coordinated, effective policies that address children's health, mental health and nutrition, early care and education, family support, and early intervention. BUILD's vision is at the center of an emerging and vibrant state-based policy movement in the early childhood development field. We work with those who set policies, provide services and advocate for our youngest children to make sure that they are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school. Visit www.buildinitiative.org.