

Classroom Characteristics and Quality

Transitioning to School: Describing the Classroom Environment of Rural, Low-Income Children in Kindergarten and First Grade

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In recent years school readiness has become a primary goal for the majority of Pre-Kindergarten programs in the United States. A lack of readiness is thought to lead to difficulties throughout a child's life in the academic world (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, 2005, pg. 6). Most readiness discussion has focused on the skills the children need to be "ready." But, ready for what? School readiness depends not only on the children but also on the subsequent school environments to which they are exposed (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004, pg. 42). In order to know both what children will be expected to do to meet school expectations -- as well as whether those expectations are appropriate -- it is critical to know more about early elementary school classroom environments. As part of a larger study of the effects of different Pre-K curricula, observational data was collected on kindergarten and 1st grade classroom environments. This particular presentation focused on descriptive accounts of the environments of Kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms from seven rural, low-income school districts in six counties in a southeastern state.

Data was collected as part of the Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research (PCER) project funded by IES that was initiated in the 2002-2003 school year. The data sample involved 36 preschool classrooms. All classrooms involved were publicly funded and linked to public schools, and there were over 500 children involved. Those children then spread into numerous kindergarten and first grade classrooms, of which 75 and 107 were observed, respectively. Trained observers visited each class once for 3.5 hours in the morning and kept a running narrative of classroom activities. The narrative was divided into segments based on instructional episodes, and each episode was coded at the time for instructional mode (grouping type) and type (primarily content), average child involvement, and teacher instructional level. Detailed accounts were obtained in regards to these variables. For example, both years were relatively similar regarding instructional mode and type, but much more time was spent in teacher-led small groups in 1st grade than in kindergarten (8.3% compared to 1.5%). Additionally, kindergartners were out of the classroom approximately 7% more than 1st graders, reflecting the trend for "special" activities like Physical Education and Music in kindergarten to occur during the morning. Both years spent significant amounts of time in transitions from one activity to another (11.0% and 12.7%).

The observation data from this study provide a detailed description of the classroom environments that children experience in kindergarten and 1st grade in this study sample. Those classrooms consist primarily of whole group instruction with a focus on basic skill instruction. If educators wish to increase children's success in school, they must first understand the classroom expectations of children in kindergarten and 1st grade. Descriptive data on a fairly large number

of classrooms from this project provide a more detailed description of those expectations than has been available.

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Observed Quality in Preschool Agencies Serving Children with Disabilities

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The quality of child care quality is linked to children's developmental outcomes, particularly for children of parents with lower levels of education (Peisner-Feinberg, et al., 2001). Process components of program quality have been linked to structural characteristics (Burchinal, Cryer, & Clifford, 2002; Cost, Quality, & Outcomes Team, 1995). There is general agreement regarding the physical and social components of quality for children with and without disabilities (Guralnick, 2001). Studies of children with disabilities classrooms with various levels of inclusion have not shown that children with disabilities show better cognitive or social outcomes in classrooms with a higher proportion of children with disabilities (Guralnick, 2001; Odom & Bailey, 2001; Stahmer & Carter, 2005).

Observations were completed of program quality in 102 public school, Head Start, and community classrooms in a midwestern state. Classrooms were randomly chosen from inclusive classrooms (those with fewer than 50% of the children on IEPs) and non-inclusive classrooms (those with 50% or more children on IEPs). Nearly 80% of the classrooms were in public schools; only 10% of the programs were in Head Start and 10% were in community child care or preschool classrooms. There were no significant differences in teacher licensure, baccalaureate degrees, or teaching experience among teachers from the three types of agencies. Over 50% of the teachers had more than 10 years of teaching experience.

Quality was assessed using seven subscales on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), two subscales from the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E), the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS), and a teacher survey. Results were reported using the 10 areas of the revised NAEYC Accreditation Standards. Overall, quality was assessed to be at a mediocre quality level. Averaged across all classrooms, only program quality related to the accreditation standard of Relationships and Families was assessed to be in the good quality range and only the math subscale of the ECERS-E was assessed to be in the range of poor quality.

Public school high inclusion classrooms and Head Start classrooms did not differ in quality; however, both had higher quality scores on several scales and subscales than public school non-inclusive classrooms or community program classrooms. Inclusive classrooms had higher overall quality, better space and furnishings, and better quality in literacy. The best predictors of quality were the use of a comprehensive, evidence-based measure and the use of a comprehensive, curriculum-based measure. A total of seven assets accounted for more than 25% of the variance in program quality measures. Assets accounted for more variance than did agency type. Results were consistent with prior studies of quality in early care and education programs showing that quality is generally mediocre in classrooms serving preschool children. Lower scores than in previous studies of the classrooms in a state-funded preschool program for

children from low-income families were attributed to the mandatory requirements for national accreditation in those programs.

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Improving Head Start Classroom Quality: Examining the Role of Teachers' Education, Experience, Beliefs and Practices

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Recently proposed amendments to the Head Start Act (H.R. 2123: the School Readiness Act of 2005 and S. 1107: Head Start Improvements for School Readiness Act) require more training and higher levels of education for teachers than ever before. Given tight fiscal budgets, it is essential that professional development funds be spent effectively and efficiently.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between Head Start teachers' characteristics (i.e., formal education, years teaching experience, self-reported beliefs and practices) with the quality of their classrooms.

Data were collected in fall of 2002, 2003, 2004, at two Head Start programs, located in mid-size cities in different regions of the same northeastern state. The Head Start programs were involved in a university partnership (Head Start Quality Research Center) designed to measure the effectiveness of using assessments to improve Head Start quality. Both programs are in ethnically and economically diverse communities. The sample includes 20 (preschool aged) classrooms, and the lead teacher in each classroom. The sample of teachers is 55% Black, 25% White, and 20% Hispanic. Almost all of the teachers had participated in some college courses. The majority of the teachers have an associates degree (60%), 20% have a bachelors or higher, 15% have taken some college courses, and 5% have not taken any college course. Most of the teachers, who completed a degree, did so in early childhood education (ECE) or child development. Overall the teachers were older and experienced teachers. The mean age of teachers was 44 years (SD 10), with a range of 23 to 60. Teachers taught in ECE a mean 15 years (SD 7), with a range of 5 to 27.

Trained data collectors conducted the FACES (Head Start Family and Child Experience Survey) classroom observation measure in each classroom and administered the FACES Lead Teacher Interview. The FACES observation included three measures, (a) Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) (Clifford, Harms, & Cryer, 1998), (b) sections of Assessment Profile (AP) (Abbott-Shim & Sibley, 1992), and (c) Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS) (Arnett, 1989).

The mean ECERS-R global quality across the classrooms was 'good' (5, on a 7 point scale). And the mean classroom quality on the ECERS-R subscales used in this study was also fairly good. For example, the ECERS-R language score was 5.2 (range 3.8 to 7), ECERS creative mean was 4.5 (range 3 to 6), and ECERS social mean was 6.1 (range 4 to 7). Based on preliminary findings, data suggests that classroom quality may not be significantly different for teachers with a bachelors degree compared to those with an associates degree. Although there appears to be some differences on the Arnett subscales, measuring teacher sensitivity and independence. Classroom quality did not appear to differ based on the teachers years of experience teaching preschool. But, participation in ECE and child development courses seems to be positively

related to the quality of the classroom. Additional analyses will also examine teachers' beliefs and practices.

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**The Utility of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised in
Predicting Later Achievement for Children in Rural Public School
Prekindergarten Programs**

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(Summary not available)