Measuring the Quality of Early Childhood Programs

by Ann S. Epstein

Every dedicated early childhood practitioner cares about program quality. Decades of research have consistently shown that the better the quality of the program, the more it supports the development of young children (e.g., Cost, Quality, and Child Outcome Study Team, 1995). Research reviews and policy statements such as those issued by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1994) emphasize that the cognitive and social development outcomes desired for children cannot be achieved without services of sufficient quality. Moreover, high quality programs encourage parent involvement and promote the retention of skilled staff. These findings are now commonly accepted — not only by professionals but also by the general public. Constituencies from all backgrounds now demand early childhood services that are not only available and accessible but high quality as well.

But how do you define program quality? How do you take an honest look at your program so you can recognize what is good and know what to improve? How can you accurately communicate this information to parents, educators, administrators, researchers, and funders? Although we all have our own ideas about what constitutes a high quality program, it is not enough to say

"I know a high quality program when I see one."

We need a common language so we can look at programs objectively and articulate our highest goals for children, parents, and staff. A good program evaluation tool is essential to promote this communication and help us work together to improve program quality.

Creating an objective and multifaceted tool to measure program quality has always been a goal of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, a private non-profit organization conducting curriculum development, staff training, and research. Our aim is to help all programs, not just those using the High/Scope approach, take an honest look at the learning opportunities they are providing to all their participants.

In developing such a measure, High/Scope staff looked at many existing program quality assessments such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms & Clifford, 1980) and the program-monitoring tools used by Head Start and state-funded pre-kindergarten programs. There were many strengths in these instruments but also areas that we felt could be further expanded in an assessment tool.

This article summarizes what High/Scope discovered to be the critical characteristics of a comprehensive and valid measure of program quality. It presents the many ways such a tool can be used to effectively evaluate and improve program quality. These points are highlighted with examples from the

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High/Scope Program Quality Assessment (PQA, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1998), an instrument developed with these specific criteria in mind. By following the guidelines presented here, early childhood programs can more effectively assess their ongoing efforts to foster children's development, involve families, promote staff development, and engage in sound management practices.

The Characteristics of Effective Program Quality Measures

The most effective program assessment tools define quality along a continuum. In talking to practitioners and researchers, we found that many were frustrated by assessment instruments that permitted only "yes-no" responses to each item. Such measures were often focused on whether programs were in compliance with a set of regulations or standards, but they did not acknowledge that quality unfolds gradually and is achieved in stages. By using a continuum to rate quality, an assessment tool helps programs identify where they are on the path to achieving quality and the successive steps they must take as they continue their progress. For that reason, each item on the PQA was developed using a five-point scale describing a broad array of program characteristics from preliminary efforts to advanced understanding. Programs using an assessment tool of this type can see where they are and where they are headed as they continually strive to improve their services. In that way, evaluation provides encouragement for moving forward.

Program assessments are most helpful if they provide users with many examples. To ensure that people are using the assessment tool fairly and objectively, the instrument should be explicit about the behaviors that define low, medium,

and high levels of quality. There should be many illustrative examples to guide raters and guarantee that different assessors will interpret and score the same behavior in the same way. In other words, assessment tools should be designed to produce a high level of agreement or inter-rater reliability. (See the discussion on testing program assessments for reliability and validity.) Multiple examples also allow staff to anchor themselves at recognizable points along the continuum and envision the changes they are striving to achieve as they advance their level. To meet these criteria, developers of the PQA provided many specific examples at levels 1, 3, and 5 of the five-point scale. The illustration on page 68, from an item in the adult-child interaction section, shows how using concrete examples can help both outside observers and classroom practitioners reliably differentiate levels of behavior.

Program assessments are most informative if they are comprehensive. We identified two types of comprehensiveness. First, assessment tools should look at the dynamic or interactive features of a program as well as its static or structural elements. Most instruments do a detailed job of looking at the structural qualities of a program such as the safety of the physical facilities or the diversity of materials and equipment. However, many tools fail to pay equal, if not more, attention to the nature of the interactions between and among adults and children. Yet we know that these interpersonal characteristics are crucial to defining program quality and promoting child development and adult collaboration.

The second aspect of comprehensiveness refers to looking at the program from multiple perspectives. While our first concern as caregivers and educators is the child's experience of the setting, we should also pay attention to

how a program serves families and staff members. A complete program assessment tool should therefore look at how teachers interact with parents, how staff interact with one another to plan for the children, how supervisors support staff development, and how management secures adequate resources. In other words, a program quality assessment should focus on the classroom, the agency, the home, and the community — and the activities and experiences of all the participants.

Program assessments make the greatest contribution to the field if they have been tested and validated. Because we each want to capture the uniqueness of our program, it is tempting to create our own assessment tools. The problem with this approach is that we end up talking only to our immediate colleagues. We cannot communicate findings or replicate proven approaches outside our own agencies. Moreover, by reinventing the wheel, we fail to apply decades of research on how to define and measure the most important components of program quality. Of course, we need to use assessment tools that are consistent with the values and curriculum models that are being implemented in our individual programs. But within these guidelines, the more we can build our assessments on agreed-upon best practices and measurement approaches, the more we will advance the field of early childhood programs as a whole. For that reason, we concluded that the most effective assessment tools also have the widest applicability across program settings.

To meet High/Scope's commitment to strengthening the early childhood field as a whole, the PQA was developed by a diverse team of researchers, training consultants, and teachers. It was validated in a series of studies in diverse early childhood settings (Epstein, 1993; High/Scope, 1997; Schweinhart, et al.,

Item III-F. Adults participate as partners in children's play.

1	2	3	4	5
Adults do not participate in children's play. Or, adults attempt to dominate children's play (e.g., by redirecting play around adult ideas, telling children what to play with or how to play).		Adults sometimes participate in children's play, using a limited number of strategies. Adults' participation in play is sometimes guided by their own agendas. Adults sometimes interrupt and attempt to redirect or take control of children's play.		Adults use a variety of strategies as co-players in children's play (e.g., adults observe and listen before and after entering children's play; assume roles as suggested by children; follow the children's cues about the content and direction of play; imitate children; match the complexity of their play; offer suggestions for extending play, staying within the children's play theme).

1998). We invited the review and comments of respected colleagues outside the Foundation. As a result of opening the process, the PQA conscientiously reflects best practices in all center-based settings, not just those using the High/Scope educational approach. The instrument is consistent with NAEYC accreditation criteria, Head Start Performance Standards, and various state guidelines for developmental appropriateness. By collaborating with colleagues in both public and private agencies, High/Scope hoped the PQA would be of value in a wide variety of program settings.

The Uses of Effective Program Quality Measures

An effective program quality assessment should also serve as a training tool. The best evaluation instruments reveal staff training needs. Assessing a program's quality should highlight its strengths and identify areas for improvement. Moreover, it should do so in a concrete way. Global quality ratings do not help staff identify specific training concerns. But comprehensive tools based on systematic observation can help teachers and administrators decide what areas they want to emphasize in preservice and inservice training. A

good measurement tool can define developmentally appropriate practice for novice teachers and help experienced teachers reflect on their practices from a new and more detailed perspective. These insights, translated into practice, are the goals of training. Creative assessment facilitates articulating and reaching these goals.

Effective assessment tools allow supervisors to observe individual staff members and provide them with constructive feedback. Assessment can be anxiety provoking if the rules are arbitrary and the intention is judgment rather than development. But a well-constructed tool can provide the person being assessed with clear expectations and opportunities for growth. Properly used, a good assessment tool allows a supervisor and a teacher to work as a team. Together, they can identify one or more areas for the supervisor to observe. Following the observation, the supervisor and the teacher can meet to review and discuss the ratings, acknowledge areas of strength, and identify specific strategies for professional growth. If designed with this use in mind, a program quality measure can contribute significantly to staff development.

Valid program quality measures are essential for research and program evaluation. At the agency level, we often need to document the quality of our programs to secure administrative support and funding. Beyond that, all practitioners share a responsibility to contribute to the knowledge of the field as a whole. A vital assessment tool can meet both local and broad interests. To meet rigorous scientific standards, the instrument must define its terminology and decision-making criteria, achieve high inter-rater reliability, demonstrate its validity in relation to other program quality measures and child outcomes, and provide a system for communicating results clearly and concisely.

Effective program assessment tools communicate to many audiences. A good assessment tool avoids jargon. It speaks to both professional and lay audiences in straightforward language. In addition to researchers and practitioners, the information gathered with a well-designed assessment tool can be easily communicated to administrators and policy makers, prospective funders, parents, and program support staff. If all these audiences speak the language used in the assessment tool, they are in a better position to collaborate on guaranteeing program quality.

Conclusion

An effective assessment tool consolidates what current theory, decades of practice, and ongoing research tell us about the components of high quality early childhood programs. It is important to regularly and systematically evaluate the structural and dynamic features of your program. Only in this way can we as practitioners, researchers, and policy makers guarantee that the services we deliver are of sufficient quality to promote the development of young children, encourage the involvement of families, and create supportive working environments for staff.

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