

# An Assessment Tool for Professional Development

Examining quality in our early childhood professionals

by Mary Benson McMullen, Mehmet Buldu, Martha Lash, and Kazim Alat

Lilian Katz (1993) describes four primary ways that we can assess our programs for quality — from above, below, outside, and inside our program. These perspectives on quality can help us make better and more informed decisions about how to make improvements within our own programs as well as impact the quality of early care and education overall. The assessment tool presented at the end of this article will allow program administrators, professional development trainers and consultants, and researchers to examine factors that influence quality from multiple, interrelated perspectives.

## Perspectives for Assessing Quality

Most of us are familiar with what Katz describes as the “above,” or *top-down perspective*, from first hand experience. It is used by licensing consultants, accreditation validators, and the many others who may be called in from outside a program to assess its quality for a variety of purposes. In this perspective quality is assessed primarily by looking at structural and process factors.

Structural variables are fairly easy to examine, as well as to regulate. They

include such factors as group size and ratio of adults to children, and the quality, quantity, and safety of resources per child (including space, equipment, and materials). In addition to features related to the more concrete aspects of programs, structural factors also include the qualifications and stability of the program staff (including educational background, engagement in ongoing professional development, experience, and turnover rates).

Process variables, on the other hand, are much more difficult to directly assess; but they are very important because they are considered to have the most direct impact on children. These include professionals’ actual ways of behaving, their personal characteristics, and the quality of the relationships that they have with children, parents, and the other adults in the workplace. The impact of process variables is difficult to assess, in part because they are so interrelated to structural factors as to be inseparable. For example, the quality of the interactions that teachers have with children in the classroom is directly related to the number of children in the environment.

Much has been learned that has helped the field of early childhood from these top-

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down approaches to examining quality. For nearly 30 years, beginning with the National Day Care Study in 1979 (see Ruopp, et al.), overwhelming evidence has shown that structural and process factors impact the effects of early childhood programs and outcomes for children. (For more recent reports on this, see the Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1999; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998; and Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001.) But there are many other ways to examine the quality of our programs; and outsiders to our programs, such as researchers and regulators, are not and should not be the only ones assessing quality.

Without question, as Lilian Katz (1993) says, the “ultimate effects of a program depend primarily on the ways it is experienced by the participating children” (p. 6). The child’s assessment of quality is reflected from “below” in the *bottom-up perspective*, which addresses the question, “What does it feel like to be a child in this environment?” Of course, engaging young children in our program assessment is, without a doubt, difficult. To engage meaningfully in such an assessment we must infer how a child would respond to such questions as, “Do I feel welcome in this program?” “Are the activities interesting, engaging, and meaningful?” “Am I accepted by my peers?” “Do I have a personal relationship with my caregivers?”

An *outside perspective* on program quality can be gained from the parents whose children are in the program as well as from the community within which the program is situated. An *inside perspective* is attained from a program’s own staff by examining factors such as professional relationships, overall job satisfaction, and perceptions of stress and/or support structures in the work environment. These two perspectives are also familiar to those of us who have been through a national self-study in preparation for accreditation. There is a

great deal of support in the research literature about the importance of the factors related to both the outside and inside perspectives in terms of quality.

In developing the Early Childhood Professional Questionnaire (ECPQ), the authors did an exhaustive search of the research on quality in preschool care and education in the United States. We identified a number of variables, including those described above under the different perspectives for assessing quality in the top-down perspective and the inside perspective. We then considered carefully how these various aspects of quality could be measured with a user-friendly, brief questionnaire.

Thirty-two caregivers, teachers, and program administrators from in and around the ECPQ authors’ community completed the earliest draft of the instrument and provided extensive feedback that aided in its first major revision. The ECPQ was then sent as part of a larger questionnaire to a random sample of 3,000 early childhood preschool professionals across the United States; 815 completed the questionnaire and helped us to refine the instrument further, resulting in the form at the end of this article. (See McMullen, Ala, Buldu, & Lash, 2004.)

It is our hope that the ECPQ will prove to be a useful tool to help program administrators, teacher educators, professional development trainers, state licensing consultants, Head Starts, and researchers better understand the various factors related to quality within their programs. Using the instrument within a large program or group of programs could help those in decision-making roles profile the strengths and challenges of their professional staff as they struggle to improve the quality within their own systems.

We invite you to use the ECPQ as an assessment tool. We ask that you

correspond with us and describe how it was used, what you learned from using this instrument, and how that information was then used to address quality issues in professional development within your programs or to gain understanding of issues of quality within your research.

## References

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## EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

### EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

Current Job Title \_\_\_\_\_ Years in Position \_\_\_\_\_

Ages of Children in Classroom/Environment \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Children Regularly in Room \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Adults Regularly in Room \_\_\_\_\_

#### My setting is best described as (select one):

- Child Care Center     Family Care     Child Care Ministry     Head Start     Montessori  
 Preschool     Parents' Day Out     Hourly Care     Other \_\_\_\_\_

The total number of years I have worked as an early childhood professional is \_\_\_\_\_ years.

In considering my current position, overall I would say that I am \_\_\_\_\_.

- Completely     Fairly     Not Sure How     Satisfied     Completely  
 Unsatisfied     Unsatisfied     Satisfied I am     Satisfied

If I could change one thing about my current position it would be:

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

#### I have completed the following:

- High School or GED  
 CDA  
 Associate's Degree; Major: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Bachelor's Degree; Major: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Master's Degree; Major: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Doctorate; Major: \_\_\_\_\_

#### I am working on the following at this time:

- High School or GED  
 CDA  
 Associate's Degree; Major: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Bachelor's Degree; Major: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Master's Degree; Major: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Doctorate; Major: \_\_\_\_\_

I plan to be done with this work (Month)\_\_\_\_\_/ (Year)\_\_\_\_\_

If you have earned any teaching licenses or special professional credentials, please describe and provide the date(s) earned. Otherwise, proceed to the next item.

Example: Elementary License, 1st - 6th grade, 1983 \_\_\_\_\_

### PERSONAL INFORMATION — Please check the correct response under each item.

#### My Age

- 18 to 28 years  
 29-39 years  
 40-47 years  
 48-59 years  
 60+ years

#### Yearly Salary

- Current Position**  
 < \$14,999  
 \$15-\$24,999  
 \$25-\$34,999  
 \$35-\$44,999  
 > \$45,000

#### Total/Family Income

- From All Sources**  
 < \$29,999  
 \$30-\$49,999  
 \$50-\$69,999  
 \$70-\$89,999  
 > \$90,000

#### Current Marital or

- Relationship Status**  
 Single  
 Single, but in committed relationship  
 Single, living with parents  
 Married  
 Divorced  
 Widowed

#### My Gender

- \_\_\_ Female  
 \_\_\_ Male

#### My school is located in a setting best described as

- \_\_\_ Rural    \_\_\_ Urban  
 \_\_\_ Suburban    \_\_\_ Other (\_\_\_\_\_)
- Approximately \_\_\_\_\_ people live in my community

#### My ethnic background is best described as

\_\_\_\_\_ (for e.g., White, Asian-American, etc.)

**MINORITY STATUS** — I belong to a group that is commonly recognized as being in the minority in the United States based on race, ethnicity, culture, or language:  YES  NO

**ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT** — In addition to any formal education you have had or are involved in now, please think about other professional development activities you engage in and indicate about how frequently you do each.

<b>KEY: Never or Not Applicable to Me = N</b>	<b>Rarely = R</b>	<b>Sometimes = S</b>	<b>Often = O</b>
I attend regular staff/faculty meetings.....	N	R	S O
I attend in-service trainings/workshops .....	N	R	S O
I attend conferences run by professional organizations locally .....	N	R	S O
I attend conferences run by professional organizations in my state.....	N	R	S O
I attend conferences run by professional organizations nationally or internationally.....	N	R	S O
I read books that are related to my profession .....	N	R	S O
I read newsletters, magazines, and/or journals written for professionals .....	N	R	S O
I write in a personal journal about my practice .....	N	R	S O
I consult with colleagues about my work .....	N	R	S O
I get advice/feedback from my supervisor(s) .....	N	R	S O
I consult with a mentor about my practice .....	N	R	S O
I consult with fellow professionals electronically through e-mail or web .....	N	R	S O

I belong to one or more professional early childhood organizations.  YES  NO

**PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS**

**My day-to-day relationships with colleagues are:**

very difficult    difficult    mixed    good    very good

**My day-to-day relationships with supervisors are:**

very difficult    difficult    mixed    good    very good

**My day-to-day relationships with parents are:**

very difficult    difficult    mixed    good    very good

**My day-to-day relationships with children are:**

very difficult    difficult    mixed    good    very good

**SUPPORT NETWORK** — Please rank in order your top three choices (1st, 2nd, 3rd) from the list of strategies you use, people you turn to or things you do to help yourself when stressed by work:

- |                            |                      |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| ___colleagues              | ___cook              |
| ___non-work friends        | ___be alone/reflect  |
| ___girl/boy friend/spouse  | ___chocolate         |
| ___family                  | ___sleep more        |
| ___religion/prayer         | ___take time off     |
| ___exercise/walk/run, etc. | ___shower/bath       |
| ___working hard            | ___play with pets    |
| ___garden                  | ___read for pleasure |
| ___on-line chatting        | ___study/research    |
| ___eating too much         | ___play games        |
| ___other: _____            |                      |