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early developments Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

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Research to Practice

From the Director's Office: The Road from Resesarch to
Practice

Finding Our Way

Mapping the Future

Building Blocks

Quality Care

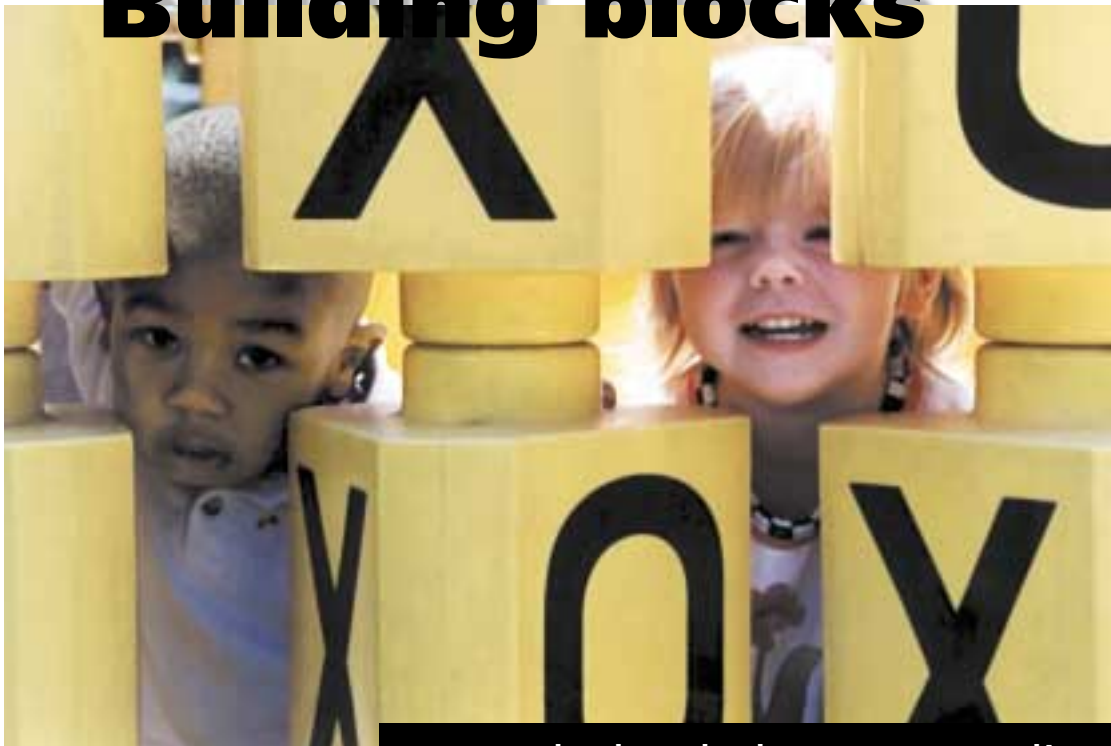
NCEDL News: Making Gains

NCEDL News: Research Spotlight

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early developments

Building blocks



Research that led to new quality assessment tools & changed personnel preparation programs

A 1975 project named the Early Childhood Education Curriculum Development Program at FPG is the linear grandparent of...

a project in Sweden that allows preschool teachers to analyze and upgrade the quality of their own programs;

a military family child care home accreditation program for the U.S. Army, Navy and Marines; and

a project in Durham, NC, that helps child care centers upgrade the quality of their care.

To name only a few of the “grandchildren.”

“**W**HEN WE BEGAN WORKING with our curriculum development program in the late 1970s, it soon became clear that we needed a way to assess the quality of early childhood programs,” said Thelma Harms, who directed that early FPG program. She and a colleague Dick Clifford went to work, and by 1980 had produced the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (ECERS), which has since become one of the most widely used scales to assess various aspects of quality in early childhood group care.

The ECERS was followed by three other scales, each measuring different segments of the early childhood field: The *Family Day Care Rating Scale* (FDCRS) used for programs in a provider’s home; the *Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale* (ITERS) for group programs for children from birth to 2 1/2 years; and the *School-Age Care Environmental Rating Scale* (SACERS) for before- and after-school group care programs for school-age children to age 12.

Harms said that in order to provide care and education that will permit children to experience a high quality of life while helping them develop their abilities, a program must provide for the three basic needs of children:

- Protection of their health and safety
- Building positive relationships
- Opportunities for stimulation and learning from experience

“It takes all three to create quality care. No one component is more or less important than the others, nor can one substitute for another. Since our scales are comprehensive process quality measures, all three aspects are included,” she said.

FPG director Don Bailey, who worked with Harms on some of her earlier projects, said, “FPG has a significant history of development of measuring and assessment tools. Sometimes researchers develop a scale just for gathering research data; at other times, the development of an assessment tool is suggested by the data. Once early childhood program directors and professionals have reliable measures of aspects of their programs, they can make changes and improvements in their programs and personnel development plans.”

The ECERS and ITERS were used as comprehensive quality measures in the National Child Care Staffing Study of 1989 and the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study (CQO) of 1995 and 1999—major studies on the effects of child care on child development. In 1998, Harms, Clifford, and Cryer brought out the revised ECERS (ECERS-R) that incorporated changes to make the ECERS function better in inclusive and culturally diverse settings.

ECERS has been translated into a number of languages and used in research and program improvement in many countries including Germany, Italy, Spain, Iceland, England, Sweden, Russia, Portugal, Hungary, and Canada. (See related story on page 13 about how North Carolina is using the ECERS in a new statewide rating system of child care programs.)

FPG’s experience in quality care and assessments also helped create an accreditation system for the nation’s military. In the early 1990s, two private foundations (Mailman and Carnegie) funded a national committee

to examine family child care quality criteria. That committee was headed by Harms and Debbie Cryer, who has also worked on measures. That led to an examination of national quality criteria for family child care followed by an FPG study comparing quality recognition systems for family child care. Eventually it led to the development of the Military Family Child Care Home Accreditation program which was completed in 1997.

New assessment tool

If there is a clear need by child care professionals in general for assessing programs, that need surely extends to early intervention programs as well. A FPG team lead by Lynette Aytch is in the final stages of completing a new *Early Intervention Services Assessment Scale* (EISAS) to examine the

quality of early intervention services provided to young children with disabilities and their families. Aytch said her team is developing a program version and a parent questionnaire.

“These types of assessment scales,” said Aytch, “are

valuable for a number of reasons. With accountability a keyword in government financing today, scales

are an important tool in evaluating programs. Well-constructed scales allow administrators and service providers to assess program practices, and parent questionnaires offer families the opportunity to provide input into the program evaluation process.”

Changes in child care


The ECERS-R scale is currently being used by a project in Durham County, NC, to help enhance quality in child care centers with practical and professional assistance, and with money. The project is Quality

Enhancement Support and Training (QUEST) and is funded by the NC Partnership for Children, the state’s Smart Start project whose mission is making sure children are ready for school when they enter the first grade.

One of the QUEST consultants is Kate Thegen, a research assistant with the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL), also based at UNC-Chapel Hill. She explained how the project works, “A child care center or a family child care program in Durham submits a request for QUEST help, and if approved, then a QUEST consultant will perform an assessment of the center, suggest changes, offer resources and technical assistance on making changes, offer substitute teacher assistance, and make grants to cover some of the changes.”

The process begins with an assessment, which includes such tools as the ECERS-R. “Also,” said Thegen, “our on-site consultation model is based on a model originally created by Partnerships for Inclusion (PFI).”

“QUEST is making a significant difference in child care centers in Durham and is making it on a very practical level. For example, one of the areas I’ve worked in has been helping teachers to understand and use the ECERS scale so they could continue using it after the QUEST consultant leaves,” she said. Thegen is also a former child care center director. Programs similar to QUEST are getting underway in other North Carolina counties as well.

A related technical assistance program, based on assessments with the Harms, Clifford and Cryer environment rating scales, is now being conducted by Harms and Theresa Sull for the District of Columbia Office of Early Childhood Development. Harms and Sull have trained 25 technical assistance specialists in Washington, DC, who are providing on-site technical assistance to centers and family child care homes over the next year. A rigorous evaluation of this technical assistance program is being carried out in order to find out more about characteristics that create success in the process of technical assistance. 



“With accountability a keyword in government financing today, scales are an important tool in evaluating programs.”

Quality care

In the spring of this year, North Carolina revised the way it rates the 9,000 regulated day care centers and homes in the states. Evaluations take into account staff education, center's history of compliance, disciplinary techniques, how teachers play with children, and staff/child ratios, among other considerations.

Research at the Frank Porter Graham Center was used to help develop the new ratings. Also, the fact that North Carolina is taking the initiative in upgrading its day care centers ratings can be traced, in part, to FPG research. Both actions are descendants of the national Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers study (CQO), begun in 1993, and of earlier FPG projects involving quality care.

The CQO project, a collaboration of four universities, included a number of FPG researchers from the very beginning. "We weren't really sure what we would find when we began this study," said Dick Clifford, a senior FPG researcher and member of the CQO team. "This was one of the first comprehensive studies to look at our care centers and document the effects of quality child care on children's development over time."

Here are just two of the findings from the first batch of data from the CQO study,* published in 1995:

- ❑ The quality of child care is primarily related to higher staff-child ratios, staff education, and administrators' prior experience. Other factors include teacher wages, education, and specialized training.
- ❑ Child care at most centers in the United States is poor to mediocre, with 40% of infants and toddlers in rooms having less-than-minimally acceptable quality.

But the sentence in the CQO study that caught the eye of North Carolinians was this one: "North Carolina, the state with the least stringent child care standards of

the four states in the study, has the highest number of poor-quality centers." (The



CQO study focused on 400 randomly selected centers in North Carolina, California, Colorado, and Connecticut.)

The sentence was an eye-opener for many families, state administrators, and policy-makers in North Carolina. So, when the state of North Carolina wanted to upgrade its child care center rating scale, it looked at a number of assessment tools created at FPG. Stephanie Fanjul, director of the North Carolina Division of Child Development, said that if a center wants to reach the top (a 5-star) rating, a voluntary rating, it must agree to be assessed using both ECERS-R (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised) and an ITERS (Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale) assessments. Both scales were developed by FPG researchers.

Don Bailey, FPG director, said, "We always examine our research for implications for public policy, personnel preparation, and additional research. It is not surprising that we are finally beginning to see changes in personnel preparation and in the regulation of child care centers and homes. This is how research ought to be used."

Head Start quality study

The same year that the first data from the CQO study came out, the Head Start Bureau decided to create a set of performance measures to provide a "report card" on how the Head Start program is doing overall. It set up a five-year project involving four Quality Research Centers. One of the four is focused on classroom quality and directed by Donna Bryant at FPG.

Research on quality care leads to policy changes

"We've added a recently developed measure of diversity to several widely-used measures in order to examine the patterns of relations among various aspects of quality, including the classroom environment, the nature of teacher-child interactions, and teacher involvement," said Bryant. (The new measure of diversity is the *Anti-Bias Environmental Checklist* created by Ellen Peisner-Feinberg, another FPG researcher.)

Some preliminary data from Bryant's project suggests:

- ❑ Different aspects of quality should be included in future efforts directed toward training of teachers as well as research.
- ❑ Both diversity and developmentally-appropriate practices contribute to the quality of classroom experiences for young children.
- ❑ Instruments to monitor quality should measure both teacher-child interactions and the physical environment.

* See Research Spotlight, page 16, for a summary of information from the latest round of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes data.