



**early developments** Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

**Fall 2003** | Volume 7 #2

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Don Trull

**J**IM GALLAGHER, FPG senior scientist and Kenan Professor Emeritus, was one of 24 psychologists among the 53 most influential people in gifted education, according to a survey of programs and centers for gifted and talented education. The list was published in **Gifted Child Today** (Vol. 25, No. 4). The survey was also cited in the May edition of the American Psychological Association's Monitor.



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**Supervising Editors**

Pam Winton, Virginia Buysse

**Writer**

John Manuel

**Designer**

Gina Harrison

**Photographers**

Don Trull

Ryann Donnelly

**Assistant Editor**

Anna Mitchell

[www.fpg.unc.edu](http://www.fpg.unc.edu)

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**To subscribe or to change your address**

contact Jay Hargrove

CB #8185, UNC-CH

Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8185

(919) 966-0888

[hargrove@mail.fpg.unc.edu](mailto:hargrove@mail.fpg.unc.edu)

**To order additional copies**

contact FPG Publications Office

(919) 966-4221

[pubs@mail.fpg.unc.edu](mailto:pubs@mail.fpg.unc.edu)

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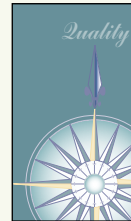
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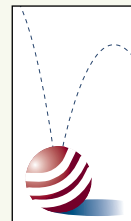


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# Director's Notes

by Don Bailey, Director



FPG Archives

Don Bailey during his early years at FPG.

I came to UNC in 1979 as a faculty member in the School of Education to direct a master's degree program in early childhood special education. When I arrived, I realized that funds from several grants had been pooled together to create

this position, including funds from FPG, and thus I had a few other jobs as well! Fortunately for me, one of those assignments was to work with Thelma Harms and Dick Clifford on a grant to train social workers in normal and atypical child development. Together we traveled around the state conducting several workshops. My job was to provide information on children with disabilities, while Thelma and Dick shared information on normal child development and appropriate environments for young children.

At first I focused primarily on my own talks. Having just finished my PhD at the University of Washington, I felt that I knew a lot about the topic but was nervous about talking to practitioners. Initially, I probably didn't pay much attention to what Dick and Thelma were saying. But once I calmed down, I began to listen.

Their message was simple but powerful—children don't develop in a vacuum, but in the context of the *environments* in which their lives are lived. Having been trained as a behaviorist, this was not a new message to me. But my training in the disability world had focused almost entirely on direct instruction, the things

that teachers do directly to teach children. Dick and Thelma showed me that both development and instruction occur in physical environments that shape development and set a tone for learning in ways that are not always obvious. In fact, I began to realize that the environment is a powerful tool that can be used to teach children, to promote social development and to help children feel comfortable, safe and happy.

I was also introduced to the idea that the quality of the early childhood environment could actually be measured. Through this I first learned about the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (ECERS). My behavioral training had taught me that measurement was central to any teaching, but it had focused mostly on ways to count what children did. The idea of using a rating scale to measure quality didn't fit with what I had been taught, but the usefulness of this approach became quickly apparent. Sure, you could go in and count the number of toys in

the room or measure square feet per child. But this kind of measurement misses much of what is important about environments for children. A rating scale, one that provides clear guidelines for differing levels of quality, in the hands of a trained and knowledgeable observer could capture quality in a way that mere counting could not.

I began to think about preschool environments for children with disabilities, the environments in which I had taught, had supervised student teachers and conducted research. As I reflected on those environments and listened to what Thelma and Dick were saying, I realized that much of it was foreign to early childhood special educators. This was at a time when most children with disabilities were in self-contained programs with other children with disabilities, separated from the normal “mainstream” programs for other young children. Together we planned and implemented a study that became one of my first databased publications. We used the ECERS to rate the quality of 25 programs for preschoolers with disabilities and compared those ratings with 56 classrooms for typically developing children in Missouri and North Carolina. The study confirmed our hypothesis. We found that preschool environments for young children with disabilities consistently received lower ratings of quality than did environments for typically developing children. In fact, often they were barren and sterile places that limited opportunities for learning and certainly did not help children feel safe, secure, or happy. This study helped us and the early childhood special education field realize that high-quality environments are important for all children. Since then, much work has occurred to assure that environments for children with disabilities are developmentally appropriate.

**M**y story could be told over and over again by other researchers, policymakers and practitioners around the world, for whom the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* and the ideas behind its development have shaped their thinking about quality and its meaning for children. The ECERS and the other scales that evolved from it now form the basis for many research studies as well as for program improvement initiatives. These studies have consistently documented the range of quality of care in the US and elsewhere, often showing that quality of care for young children is inadequate. Other studies have provided clear evidence that quality matters in the learning and social outcomes for children. Collectively, the scales have had a profound impact on how we think about care for young children.

This issue of *Early Developments* is devoted to the scales and to its authors. Through stories and interviews, you will learn how the scales were developed and see a few of the many examples of their influence. One lesson from this work, which now spans more than 20 years, is that a good tool can facilitate the work of many people, and its use can extend well beyond the place where it was first developed. And how about this for a slogan: **Quality counts, so count quality!** | [ed](#) |

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