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# A Giant in Her Field



Don Trull

**W**HEN THELMA HARMS ENGAGES YOU IN CONVERSATION, the room comes alive. She exudes enthusiasm, voice breathless, eyes bright. When you speak, you get the feeling that she is paying close attention. Indeed, Harms has made a career of being a keen observer both of people and environments. Semi-retired from FPG after 45 years of professional involvement in early childhood education, Harms has as many projects and commitments as ever.

Harms is known around the world for many accomplishments, but the one that stands out above all else is her lead authorship of the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (ECERS), and its companion rating scales for infants and toddlers (ITERS), family day care (FDCERS), and school-age care (SACERS) environments. Employed as evaluative, research and training tools in every state in the Union and many foreign countries, these scales are changing the face of child care. They may not be the last word in defining quality, but they speak so loudly as to overshadow virtually every other tool.

The evolution of the scales and of Harms' career in early childhood goes back to her days as a young mother raising two sons and a daughter in Berkeley, CA. Harms decided to take a hiatus from her job teaching English and German literature to stay home with her children. The delight she took in watching her children grow steered her in a new direction.

"Every child in the neighborhood played at our house," Harms says. "Eventually, a neighbor asked me to take care of her two young school-aged sons. In effect, I became a family child care provider and found that I really liked it. When I went back to school, I wanted to do something that brought together my interests in psychology, teaching and children. I decided to pursue a master's degree in Child Development at UC-Berkeley."

As it happened, Harms landed in the mecca of early childhood research. The University of California at Berkeley is home to the Harold E. Jones Child Study Center, a multi-disciplinary research center with a preschool program similar in nature to FPG's. While pursuing a master's degree, Harms taught at the Berkeley Public Schools Parent Cooperative. There she was exposed to parents and children of all different racial and ethnic groups. She later became head teacher at the Jones Center while pursuing a doctorate.

"I had 15 years of being questioned, challenged and prodded by bright, eager grad students from various disciplines who wanted to learn the best way to educate young children," Harms says. "I realized my point of view was extremely eclectic. It combined intellectual and social development with freedom to experiment and create."

In 1975, Harms was offered a position at FPG as Director of Curriculum Development, then a new initiative at the center. Harms and FPG researcher Richard M. Clifford decided to take the best of what was known through research and writing in the field and turn this into practical materials that could be used to improve the quality of care.

"I was always interested in developing materials to be used in early childhood education," Harms says. "At FPG, I was given free reign to see what was needed in the field. Jim Gallagher encouraged me to visit other programs in the US practicing different approaches to curriculum development."

During her first year at FPG, Harms traveled to community colleges all over North Carolina, explaining what she and others had learned about quality environments through both research and teaching. At one of her training sessions, a county child care coordinator told Harms she needed to provide some kind of written material that listed what should be done to improve quality at child care centers. Harms had a good idea of what to draw upon.

"While teaching at Berkeley, I was very much interested in assessment," Harms says. "At the end of each day, I and my graduate students would evaluate what we had seen, asking how different areas of the room and different materials were employed. I had developed and published a checklist of what I considered important for a quality learning environment. This proved to be the foundation of ECERS."

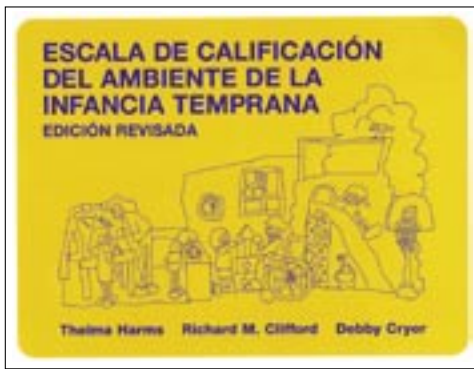
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—Thelma Harms

photo courtesy of Thelma Harms



Harms came to UNC in 1975 as Director of Curriculum Development at FPG.



Since the release of ECERS, Harms has ridden a whirlwind of publishing, training and research and development projects related to the rating scales.

From 1987 through 1990, Harms helped write and produce a 10-part Public Broadcasting television series called “Raising America’s Children.” Funded by the Smith-Richardson Foundation, the Xerox Corporation and the Janirve Foundation, in cooperation with the North Carolina Center for Public Television, this series was widely shown throughout the US and overseas. Other notable publications include the seven-volume *Active Learning Series* with lead author

Debby Cryer, which have been widely used as a curriculum for infants through kindergarteners.

Harms has been a panelist or keynote speaker at more than 200 state, national and international conferences on child care. She has led more than 100 training sessions on the use of the rating scales, both here and abroad. She has served as a consultant to non-profit organizations, states, colleges, the military services and international ministries of health.

The success of Harms’ work overseas testifies both to her interest in and ability to work with people of different nationalities and to the widespread applicability of the rating scales. The scales have been translated into many languages,

including Spanish, Swedish, Italian, French Canadian, Norwegian, Icelandic, Hungarian and Russian. In the mid-1980s, Harms and Clifford traveled to Germany to provide guest seminars on the use of the rating scales. Fluent in German, Harms later helped field test the translation of ECERS into that language. She visited German centers with child care professionals and helped them adapt the scale to a German context.

Today, ECERS-R is widely used in Germany, as are ITERS, FDCRS and SACERS. Professionals say Harms’ influence is affecting the way child care is viewed throughout the country. “There is now an increasing belief that quality in child care can be measured and enhanced in a planned way,” says Wolfgang Tietze, professor at the Institut für Kleinkindpädagogik in Berlin. “The starting point for quality assessment was inspired by Thelma’s work.”

## Key Dates in Harms’ Career



### 1959

Named head teacher at Harold E. Jones Child Study Center at the University of California at Berkeley

### 1962

Instructor in Early Childhood Education, UC-Berkeley Extension Division

### 1975

Received PhD in Early Childhood Education from UC-Berkeley

Hired as Director of Curriculum Development at the FPG Child Development Center

### 1980

Publication of **ECERS** (with Richard M. Clifford)

### 1988–1996

Publication of **Active Learning Series**, curriculum for infants through kindergartners (with Debby Cryer)

### 1989

Publication of **FDCERS** (with Richard M. Clifford)

Cathy Sylva, professor at the University of Oxford, sees similar effects in England from Harms' work. "Thelma has made a substantial contribution to research in the United Kingdom on early childhood education and care," Sylva says. "Many of us have used ECERS for studying quality across a range of British settings. She has shared her experiences with us from countries around the world and asked us the kinds of searching questions that have enabled us to improve our own work."

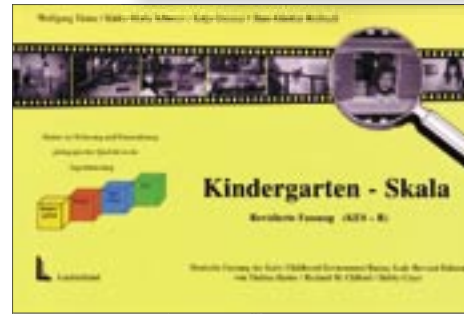
Most recently, Harms has served as Co-Principal Investigator with FPG's Lynette Aytch of the Quality Care for Children Initiative (QCCI) in Washington, DC. Funded by the District of Columbia Office of Early Childhood Education, QCCI is training a team of local professionals to provide on-site consultation and technical assistance to child care providers throughout the District, using rating scale assessments as a basis for program improvement. Now in its third phase, the initiative has led to an explosion of national accreditation of child care centers in DC, from only 7 in 2000 to 63 in 2003.

Barbara Ferguson Kamara is Executive Director of the Office of Early Childhood Development and Harms' lifelong friend and colleague. Kamara is especially complimentary about Harms' ability to convince people from different racial and socio/economic backgrounds of the value of the rating scales.

"Thelma came into communities of color without fear," Kamara says. "If she faced criticism, she'd say, 'Let's sit down and talk about it.'"

"Thelma has been a giant in the field in terms of giving people *a way* to assess how they're doing in creating learning environments for young people," Kamara says. "She has never strayed from that path."

Don Bailey echoes Kamara's thoughts. "Thelma is one of those rare individuals who truly has made a difference in the lives of literally thousands of children, families and professionals," Bailey says. "Her work has always been driven by a single goal—to assure a high quality early childhood experience for every child. The scales that she and her colleagues have developed are recognized around the world for their importance, and their impact on research and services will continue to be felt for years to come." |ed|



**1990**  
Release of public television series "Raising America's Children" (with Debby Cryer)

Publication of **ITERS** (with Debby Cryer & Richard M. Clifford)

**1996**  
Publication of **SACERS** (with Ellen Jacobs & Donna White)

**1998**  
Publication of **ECERS-R** (with Richard M. Clifford & Debby Cryer)

**1999**  
Principal Investigator, Quality Care for Children Initiative

**2002**  
Publication of Spanish translation of **ECERS-R**

**2003**  
Publication of **ITERS-R** (with Debby Cryer & Richard M. Clifford)



# A Star Performer

**A** LONG WITH THEIR APPLICATIONS for research and training, FPG's environment rating scales (ECERS, ITERS, FDCRS and SACERS) are being used widely to support the improvements of quality in early care and education across the country.

In 1997, North Carolina passed legislation requiring all early care and education teachers including family child care homes as well as centers, to be licensed by the state. To encourage higher quality and to help the public differentiate between providers of varying quality, the state decided in 1999 to offer a Five-Star Rating System. This system is based on the environment rating scales and other quality criteria, such as ensuring higher levels of teacher education and fewer children per teacher. Centers that meet the minimum state requirements are given a one-star rating. Applying for more than a one-star rating is not required; however, doing so can give programs a competitive advantage over other centers. For example, high star ratings can enable centers to receive higher subsidies for providing early care and education to children from economically disadvantaged families.

Centers applying for higher numbers of stars are visited by assessors from the North Carolina Rated License Project, funded by the NC Division of Child Development and coordinated by The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Using the rating scales, assessors conduct an extensive evaluation of what children experience in the classrooms. These assessors were initially trained in the use of the rating scales by FPG staff, who conduct regular follow-up checks to verify the assessors' reliability.

"It's very important to us and to the state that the assessors continue to do their work in a reliable way," says Cathy Riley, trainer in the Rated License Project. "We want to avoid the situation where one assessor awards a certain number of points and another gives a widely different score. Our follow-up checks help take the subjectivity out of the process and ensure a degree of fairness and uniformity."

Janice Fain is program manager with the NC Division of Child Development. Asked why the state chose FPG's scales to back up its rating system, Fain says, "They [the scales] are nationally recognized and based on solid research."

Fain says the star system has served as a motivation for centers across the state to improve their services. "We've seen a big increase in three- to five-star programs in the

years we've been running the program," she says. "These centers chose to upgrade in order to get those stars."

Parents clearly benefit from having a rating system as a guide (see page 6), and for reasons other than one might predict. Debby Cryer, FPG investigator and coauthor of the rating scales, has found that parents almost always significantly overestimate the quality of their child's day care. As part of the Cost-Quality-Outcomes Study conducted in 1993, thousands of parents were asked to assess the quality of their children's early childhood settings, considering the same aspects of care that are evaluated in the environment rating scales. Trained assessors then compared the parents' findings to an assessment using the scales. Researchers found that parents tended to rate the quality of services far higher than the assessors did using the rating scales.

"Part of the reason for this discrepancy is that parents naturally want to believe that they are providing their children with the best care," Cryer says.

"But parents aren't there to see what goes on during the course of the day. Further, parents may not understand what is needed to maintain a high-quality group care environment. For example, a parent may not wash their hands after changing their own baby's diaper at home. That's not as big of a problem when you're dealing with just one child. But if child care providers fail to wash their hands after changing diapers, they can quickly spread disease into many families and the greater community."

"The effects of child care are largely imperceptible to parents," Cryer says. "That's why the stars system was developed."

Three other states, Oklahoma, Kentucky and Tennessee, now have rated licenses based on the scales. Arkansas is using the scales as a basis for granting special recognition to high-quality early care and education centers, and the cities of Las Vegas and Salt Lake are pressing for regulations using the scales as the basis for evaluating quality. The scales are performing a starring role in promoting better early childhood environments for young children across the country. |ed|

Don Trull



Debby Cryer, during her tenure as Director of the FPG Family & Child Care Program.

### To Learn More

**Child Care Licensing.** (NCEDL Spotlights No. 36). National Center for Early Development & Learning. (2002, April). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, NCEDL.

[[www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/pages/prdcts.htm#SpotlightAnchor](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/pages/prdcts.htm#SpotlightAnchor).]

**Regulation of child care.** National Center for Early Development & Learning. (2002, Winter). *Early Childhood Research & Policy Briefs*, (2)1. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, NCEDL.

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**Parents as child care consumers.** Cryer, D., & Burchinal, M. (1997). *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, 35-58.

