The Developmental Suitability of a Sample of Preschool Classrooms: An Examination of Quality

Kerry G. Hofer, Mark W. Lipsey, Dale C. Farran, Carol Bilbrey, & Patricia K. Abelson

MEASURES

ECERS-R
- One of most widely-used measures of global classroom quality
- First 6 of 7 subscales were used (as is typical in research studies using the ECERS-R)
- Items rated on 7-point Likert scale (1 = Inadequate, 7 = Excellent)

ELLCO
- The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (Smith & Dickinson, 2002)
- All 5 subscales were used
- Items rated on 5-point Likert scale (1 = Deficient, 5 = Exemplary)

Narrative Record
- Farran & Bilbrey, 2004
- Running continuous record of everything that occurs during the observational period
- Observation period broken into “episodes” which are coded for length of time, type of activity grouping (Whole group, Small group, etc.) and type of content (Math, Literacy, Science, etc.)

RESULTS

ECERS-R
- Overall, scores on most subscales were in the “Good” range. Lowest mean scores were on the Activities subscale, and the highest scores were seen on the Interactions subscale.
- Type of school was not a significant predictor of subscale or total scores in hierarchical regression analyses.
- ELLCO
  - Like the ECERS-R, overall ELLCO scores were fairly high, representing variability across the “Basic” to “Strong” quality anchors.
  - Type of school was not a significant predictor of subscale or total scores in hierarchical regression analyses.
- Narrative Record
  - Classrooms divided their academic in-classroom day fairly evenly between whole group and small group/center groupings. However, a large portion of the prime instructional time was spent in meals/transitions/out-of-room activities (42%).
  - Almost half of the morning was spent in non-academic learning content, while the majority of the remainder of the time was focused on lessons with mixed focus, switching quickly among content areas.

SAMPLE

Data for this study come from a larger study investigating the effectiveness of a voluntary Pre-K program in a southeast state. This five-year project is in its second year, and the first wave of data is now complete. As part of that larger study, 39 state-funded preschool programs were 17 districts were observed, and ratings of quality were obtained. These classrooms are a representative sample of all public Pre-K classrooms in 1 of the 4 state regions, and are comprised of a mix of urban and rural locations. The 39 classrooms were defined in the following way:
- 21 schools in cities (53.8%)
- 6 schools in towns (15.4%)
- 12 schools in rural areas (30.8%)

This program is a full-day program for 4-year-olds. The nature of the program gives priority to children from low-income families. Each classroom has a licensed lead teacher, a maximum class size of 20, and a state-approved curriculum. Live observations were conducted by trained project staff in each class one time during the Spring, starting at 8:00 a.m. and concluding at 12:00 p.m., a period considered to be the prime instructional time of the day.

DISCUSSION

This study draws attention to the types of quality seen in some state-funded prekindergarten classrooms. ECERS-R and ELLCO scores, while not at the top of the scale, tended to be situated around what is considered at least “acceptable”. Narrative Record data, however, revealed a large portion of the prime instructional time of the day that is not focused on any academic content at all, very little time spent on content areas other than literacy/language, and large portions of academic time spent in whole-group groupings. This study has important implications for state-run Professional Development programs for Pre-Kindergarten teachers. The question might shift from how highly classrooms are aligned with these popular quality measures to whether actual matters for children is being measured with these instruments.

While type of school (city, town, rural) did not significantly predict differences in these quality variables of interest for this sample of classrooms, as the project progresses to collect additional observational data from classrooms across the state, these variables will continue to be examined. It is important to investigate whether the same quality profiles can be upheld in all publicly-funded Pre-K classrooms across a state, regardless of their location.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the two widely popular quality measures that were used in this study, average scores for classrooms’ general quality and literacy/language-specific quality were fairly high. However, there was a great deal of variation in scores across individual classrooms, and variation was larger across the majority of subscales for city schools than for schools in towns or rural areas. Ranges in scores for ECERS subscales were greater than 4.5 points in city schools, and greater than 3 points for some ELLCO subscales. Given these large ranges in quality scores, one must consider the scale of a statewide Pre-K system. Whether quality, as measured by instruments such as these that are important to state policy, can be maintained at high enough levels across schools in a program this large is an important consideration. Additional considerations, in light of the Narrative Record revealed about how time is being spent in these classrooms, involve whether the ECERS-R and ELLCO are adequate measures of classroom quality aspects that are important for children’s success.

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