

Holding Your Program Accountable

Introducing High/Scope's New Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA)

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The first educational reform principle in the K–12 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is “stronger accountability for results.” (For more information on NCLB, see <http://www.nclb.gov>.) As this initiative takes effect, states will have to develop standards for education, and children will be tested to see whether those standards are met. This pressure for accountability is also being felt in early childhood programs such as Head Start, where funding may be contingent on the results of literacy and numeracy tests administered to four-year-olds as they enter and leave the program. Standards being developed for state-funded pre-kindergarten programs may result in comparable demands for accountability in those initiatives. With funding for early care and education facing budget cuts in these times of economic belt-tightening, it is understandable that public investors and private citizens want evidence that scarce dollars are being well spent.

Accountability and Quality

We cannot hold children accountable for their performance without also holding programs accountable for educating them. Yet an emphasis on testing young children runs the risk of diverting us from focusing on the *quality* of the early childhood programs they attend. Quality comes to be defined by children's preacademic performance alone. The primary purpose of early childhood programs, however, must be to promote healthy development in *all* domains of children's growth—physical, intellectual, and social-emotional. Concerns about having a narrow focus on preacademics have appeared in a series of papers from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), most notably *Eager to Learn* (NAS, 2000a) and *Neurons to Neighborhoods* (NAS, 2000b). Quality advocates, drawing on studies such as *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes* (Cost, Quality, & Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995), further emphasize that early development is affected by a program's structural and process elements, including staff qualifications, relationships with families, coordination with other community services, and overall program management. In other words, program

quality, like child development, is complex and multidimensional. It cannot be defined by a single narrow area.

Every dedicated early childhood professional cares about program quality. But how do we know when we've achieved it? How do we define and measure quality without waiting for—or depending on—children's test scores to tell us if we're providing the right learning experiences? We have to look at our programs honestly to identify what is good and what needs improvement. We also need a common language to share this information with parents, administrators, researchers, and policymakers. An objective program evaluation tool is essential to encourage self-assessment and promote communication among everyone concerned about program quality and its implications for early childhood development.

Overview of High/Scope's Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA)

Providing a valid tool to measure program quality is a long-standing and ongoing commitment of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Toward this end, we are pleased to announce the publication of the second edition of High/Scope's Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA; High/Scope, 2003)¹. The PQA is a rating instrument used to evalu-

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ate the quality of early childhood programs and identify staff training needs. It is appropriate for use in all center-based settings, not just those using the High/Scope educational approach. For example, the PQA is used by the Michigan Department of Education to monitor and fund its preschool programs in over 500 school districts and 100 community agencies state-wide. The instrument has also been used in state and national studies of Head Start, state-funded prekindergarten programs, and child care settings. These programs serve a diversity of children and families.

The PQA intentionally reflects research-based and field-tested best practices in early childhood education. The measure identifies the structural characteristics and dynamic relationships that effectively promote the development of young children, encourage the involvement of families and communities, and create supportive working environments for staff. In keeping with the field's emphasis on a comprehensive approach to quality, the PQA examines all aspects of program implementation, from the physical characteristics of the setting and the nature of adult-child interaction to program staffing and management. It further reflects a professional consensus that the assessment of program quality should not be based on a single type of data but requires a multidimensional approach. PQA data are therefore collected using both observational and interview techniques.

The Preschool PQA reflects research-based and field-tested best practices.

The PQA can be administered by trained independent evaluators or used by programs as a self-assessment tool. It can be employed to conduct systematic quantitative research or to design staff development programs. Using classroom observations and interviews with teaching and administrative staff, PQA raters complete a series of objective 5-point scales describing a broad array of program characteristics. The endpoints and the midpoint of each indicator are defined and illustrated with examples to ensure reliable and valid ratings. Unlike compliance measures, which typically permit only yes-no scores on items, the PQA defines quality along a continuum of levels. These multiple levels allow raters to indicate with greater specificity a program's current status and directions for improvement. In sum, the structure and content of the PQA permit both breadth and depth of focus in the measurement of program quality.

How to Use the Preschool PQA

The PQA has widespread applicability as a training, monitoring, observation/feedback, and research and evaluation instrument. The information generated can be used to define and illustrate best practices, focus attention on program development issues in preservice and inservice training, examine the relationship between program practices and children's development, and point to promising policy initiatives and investments for improving the

The Preschool PQA examines all aspects of program implementation.

quality of early childhood programs. Below are some of the ways the PQA can be applied.

Training. The PQA can be used in preservice and inservice training. The detailed examples in the indicators for each item offer concrete illustrations of best practices in operation. Users often comment that the PQA defines "developmentally appropriate practice" by translating an idea or ideal into specific implementation strategies. Even experienced teachers find that the depth of the PQA helps them reconsider long-established practices from a new perspective.

Self-assessment and monitoring. The PQA is a valuable tool for programs to assess their own practices and identify areas for further development and training. It can also be used by agency supervisors or others responsible for quality control to monitor program implementation at a single site or across multiple sites. Because the PQA is objective and quantitative, it can be used to set program goals in one or more areas and to provide a numerical and anecdotal record of progress.

The Preschool PQA can be used in preservice and inservice training.

Observation and feedback. Staff supervision and evaluation can be effective and nonthreatening when the PQA is used to conduct observations and provide feedback. An individual staff member or teaching team agrees with a supervisor to focus on one or more aspects of implementation. The supervisor then uses the relevant PQA items or section(s) to observe the staff member or team in the program setting, record detailed anecdotes and make ratings, and discuss these with the practitioners. Together, they acknowledge strengths and identify areas for improvement, using the PQA's concrete examples to develop a plan of action.

Research and evaluation. When administered by trained outside observers, the PQA is a reliable and valid research tool. Studies can be designed to document program practices, compare quality in different program settings or types of auspices, and examine the relationship between program quality and young children's development. The PQA can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of staff development initiatives by assessing program quality before and after inservice training activities.

The Preschool PQA is a reliable and valid research tool.

Information and dissemination. With its straightforward language and detailed examples, the PQA can be used to explain research-based best practices to a variety of individuals and agencies. Potential audiences include administrators and policymakers, particularly those who need help identifying the elements of high-quality programs. Support staff can also benefit from becoming familiar with the PQA to better understand the actions and requests of the instructional staff. Sharing the PQA with parents helps them understand the program and how to carry its educational activities into the home. Results of the PQA can be easily communicated to researchers, and the instrument's accessibility makes it possible for others to replicate and extend the lessons learned about effective program practices.

What's New

The hallmarks of the old PQA—its comprehensiveness and clarity—remain part of the new edition. At the same time, the second edition corrects certain shortcomings, most notably the skewing of scores toward the positive end of the distribution. Raters reported that the old rules required them to assign overall item scores of 4 or 5 (5 being the highest) to programs that were in reality not operating at such high levels of quality. The new PQA procedures require raters to document each component of an item and follow rigorous decision-making rules before assigning a total item score, a change that has greatly improved the distribution of scores. In addition to these changes, High/Scope has also made improvements in the PQA's content and structure. Confusing items have been reworded and redundant items consolidated. Several formatting changes accommodate the new scoring procedures and make the PQA easier to use. Finally, extensive data collected during a series of state and national studies have allowed us to verify the new PQA's psychometric properties, that is, the statistics that tell us whether the instrument is reliable and valid.

Evidence of Reliability and Validity

The psychometric properties of the PQA were tested in a series of studies in which trained observers collected data in over 800 diverse program settings (Jurkiewicz, 2003). Score distributions on the PQA demonstrated variance (i.e., 27% were low, 43% were medium, and 30% were high). Interrater reliability computed as percentage of agreement aver-

aged 90% or better, and correlations between scores ranged from .57 to .75. Internal consistency, calculated with Cronbach's alpha, averaged .89, .94, and .95 in three study samples. In a confirmatory factor analysis, five factors corresponding to sections I through V accounted for 58% of the variance. As further evidence of validity, the PQA has been significantly correlated in the expected direction with other measures of program quality, teacher beliefs, and child outcomes. The magnitude of these correlations ranged from .25 to .86.

A Snapshot of the PQA

The PQA has 63 items that address seven key areas of program quality. Sections I through IV are assessed in each classroom; sections V through VII are assessed for the agency as a whole.

- I. Learning Environment (9 items)
- II. Daily Routine (12 items)
- III. Adult-Child Interaction (13 items)
- IV. Curriculum Planning and Assessment (5 items)
- V. Parent Involvement and Family Services (10 items)
- VI. Staff Qualifications and Staff Development (7 items)
- VII. Program Management (7 items)

To complete the PQA, raters observe the program and interview the appropriate staff members. They record supporting evidence for each row (component) of every item. They read the indicators (definitions and examples) for that row and check the one box per row that best reflects the supporting evidence. Then, using the scoring rules in the box on page 14, they circle one quality rating from 1 (low) to 5 (high) for the item as a whole.

Only by engaging in honest assessment can we assure program quality.

See the boxes at the end of this article for two sample items from the PQA. Item I-F is a classroom-level item with four rows; item V-A is an agency-level item with two rows.

Conclusion

To be accountable for meeting our mission and goals in early childhood education, we must regularly and systematically evaluate the structural and dynamic components of our programs. Only by engaging in honest assessment can we as practition-

ers, researchers, and policymakers guarantee that the services we deliver are of sufficient quality to promote the development of young children and support those who care for them. High/Scope's Preschool PQA is a reliable and valid tool for conducting this comprehensive assessment. It reflects what current theory, decades of practice, and ongoing research tell us about the ingredients of high-quality early childhood programs.

References

- Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team. (1995). *Cost, quality, and child outcomes in child care centers*. Denver: University of Colorado at Denver, Economics Department.
- High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. (2003). *Preschool Program Quality Assessment* (2nd ed.). Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

- Jurkiewicz, T. (2003). *The Revised Preschool PQA: Report on psychometric properties*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Research Division.
- National Academy of Sciences. (2000a). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- National Academy of Sciences. (2000b). *Neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. ■



Scoring Rules for the Preschool PQA

For items with 3 or more rows of boxes

- Level 1: Half or more of the level 1 boxes are checked (regardless of the level 3 or level 5 boxes checked).
- Level 2: Fewer than half of the level 1 boxes are checked and some of the level 3 and/or level 5 boxes are checked.
- Level 3: Half or more of the level 3 boxes are checked and no level 1 boxes are checked.
- Level 4: Fewer than half of the level 3 boxes are checked and the remaining boxes are checked at level 5.
- Level 5: All the level 5 boxes are checked and no level 1 boxes or level 3 boxes are checked.

For items with 2 rows of boxes

- Level 1: Both level 1 boxes are checked.
- Level 2: One level 1 box and either one level 3 box or one level 5 box are checked.
- Level 3: Both level 3 boxes are checked.
- Level 4: One level 3 box and one level 5 box are checked.
- Level 5: Both level 5 boxes are checked.

I-F. Classroom materials are varied, manipulative, open-ended, and authentic and appeal to multiple senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste).

I-F score (circle one level using scoring rules):

1 2 3 4 5

Check here if not observed or reported

Level 1 Indicators	Level 3 Indicators	Level 5 Indicators	I-F. Supporting evidence/aneecdotes:
<input type="checkbox"/> Most of the materials in most of the interest areas lead to prescribed outcomes (e.g., art cut-outs, lotto games, worksheets, coloring books, commercial toys—McDonald figures).	<input type="checkbox"/> Some open-ended materials are available in some interest areas (e.g., boxes, paper, beads, paints).	<input type="checkbox"/> Most of the available materials in all interest areas are open-ended (e.g., blocks, books, sand, water, corks, dolls, scarves, toy vehicles, paints, shells).	<i>Table: puzzles, counting bears, pegboard; Science: scales, globe, magnetic rods; Computer: PC & printer; Art: smocks, beads, clay, markers, scissors, ink pad, easel, paints; Blocks: wooden, hollow, & unit, stop sign, cars; Books: many, couch; House: ethnic dolls, bed, cash register</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> The classroom does not provide manipulative materials in any of the areas.	<input type="checkbox"/> The classroom provides some manipulative materials in some areas.	<input type="checkbox"/> The classroom provides many manipulative materials in all areas.	<i>See above—e.g., puzzles, lacing bears, peg boards, Bristle Blocks, Tinkertoys, beads, shape punches, feathers, sponges, stamps & ink pad, stapler, paper scraps, pencils, cars & trucks, ironing board</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Materials include many toy replicas in place of "real" items (i.e., toy plates and cups in place of real dishes, small plastic tools).	<input type="checkbox"/> Materials include some toy replicas in place of "real" items (e.g., toy register, toy broom).	<input type="checkbox"/> Materials include many "real" items in place of toy replicas (e.g., dog dish, firefighter boots, steering wheel, gardening tools, suitcases, briefcases, pots and pans, hammer and saw, telephone).	<i>Plastic dishes and appliances; play tools (no real hammers, etc.)</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Many materials do not appeal to all the senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling).	<input type="checkbox"/> Some materials appeal to multiple senses (e.g., stuffed animals, instruments, play dough).	<input type="checkbox"/> Many materials appeal to multiple senses and include both natural and manufactured materials (e.g., materials include items with hard and soft textures; snacks with many smells and tastes; objects made of wood, fabric, metal, paper, liquid).	<i>Musical instruments, sand, clay, wood, yarn laces</i>

V-A. The program provides a variety of opportunities for parents to become involved in the program.

V-A score (circle one level using scoring rules):

1 2 3 4 5

Check here if not observed or reported

Level 1 Indicators	Level 3 Indicators	Level 5 Indicators	V-A. Supporting evidence/aneecdotes:
<input type="checkbox"/> There are no activities or materials to help parents become involved in the program.	<input type="checkbox"/> The program provides some parent-oriented activities or materials to help parents become involved in the program.	<input type="checkbox"/> There are many parent involvement options consistent with a variety of parent interests and time constraints, e.g., parents may <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer in the classroom • Bring in materials • Attend parent meetings and workshops • Serve on parent advisory councils • Meet with teachers to discuss children's progress • Support children's learning at home • Read or contribute to a parent newsletter 	<i>Parents welcome at greeting circle; can stay as long as want; parents accompany class on field trips; family meetings with potlucks; families bring in materials, family photographs, things from home; parent newsletter; parents rotate bringing snacks on Fridays</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> The program does not encourage parent participation.	<input type="checkbox"/> The program sometimes encourages parent participation.	<input type="checkbox"/> The program encourages parent participation (e.g., providing child care, arranging transportation, scheduling events at times convenient for parents, making reminder phone calls the day before, networking parents with one another).	<i>Arrange car pooling and transportation to school and meetings for families without cars; child care during parent meetings; handwritten invitations/reminders for meetings; Web site with classroom news and notes</i>