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Increasing Accountability Measures for Early Childhood Teachers Using Evaluation Models: Observation, Feedback, and Self-Assessment

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President Barack Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan are promoting an early learning initiative focusing on the agenda of every four year old having equal access to high-quality early learning environments (Administration for Children and Families, 2013). One way the Federal government is supporting this proposal is through a grant; Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). As this grant is being implemented throughout the states, policymakers are pushing for higher teacher accountability through the "workforce" heading of the grant. One way many states are implementing a plan focusing on the early learning workforce is through developing a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). These systems focus states' efforts on teacher accountability by depicting certain teacher evaluation models that are currently being researched and implemented (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The three main teacher evaluation models, focused on in this article, are observation, feedback, and self-assessment. These three models can be implemented separately or in conjunction with each other, which is also discussed.

Keywords: Early childhood education, teacher evaluation, preschool, Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, quality rating and improvement system

In his State of the Union address on February 12, 2013, President Obama stated,

> In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children…studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind.

This statement, along with other statements from the President in his last two terms is primarily based on research showing that brain development occurs most rapidly early in life. Organizations, such as UNICEF, an organization developed in the 1940s as a way to address the needs of children worldwide, have advocated for early childhood education because of the immense brain development occurring in the first years of life (The World Bank, 2011). Additionally, The World Bank, a leader in the Human Development Network (HDN) released a statement that said, "Medical research has demonstrated that the most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first few years of life and that the experiences of early childhood have an enduring effect on an individuals' future learning capacity" (The World Bank Group, 2011). Therefore, with the available research and comprehensive early learning agenda proposed by President Obama, individuals around the nation and worldwide are building upon the understanding that investment in early childhood education, care, and development for the nation's youngest learners will prevent the achievement gap before it even starts (White House, 2013).

Leading officials working with President Obama are also in support of the proposed early learning initiative. The U.S. Department of Education's leading

official, Secretary Arne Duncan stated that, "Perhaps the best investment we can make is early childhood education—getting our babies off to a great start and getting them into kindergarten ready to learn and read" (Connelly, 2010).

Top economists are also supporting President Obama and Secretary Duncan. Organizations, such as ReadyNation and the National Women's Law Center, are gathering professionals from a variety of careers to build support of the proposed initiative. Economists in support of the proposed early learning campaign agree that high-quality programs for early learning are needed in order to create a more equal educational system for children from all types of families and communities (Administration for Children and Families, 2013).

President Obama, his administration, and business professionals are not the only people who have the goal of increasing the quality of early learning atmospheres for children. Researchers, such as Guernsey and Ochshorn (2011), agree with the initiative, but also expand on the proposal. They propose that early learning teachers need more accountability measures in order to improve the early learning atmosphere and demonstrate high student achievement (Guernsey & Ochshorn, 2011). Therefore, researchers who understand the importance of early learning environments are currently researching accountability measures to put into preschool classrooms, such as teacher evaluation models. It has been stated when teachers are evaluated, with a purpose, substantial improvements to instruction and other social emotional factors could benefit (Pianta & Hamre, 2009).

Therefore, teacher accountability is part of the President's early learning initiative. Holding teachers accountable is being met through teacher evaluation models. Teacher evaluations provide meaningful information that can be used to improve the quality and application of educational programs (Decker & Decker, 2001). In the past, early childhood teachers have had some form of evaluation system. However, with increased accountability creates the need for a teacher evaluation measurement instrument, which researchers, policymakers, and school administrators are working on developing.

Consequently, this paper focuses on three evaluation models that are being researched and are predominately used in early childhood settings. The three methods are observation, feedback, and self-reflection. This paper will aid educators, community members, and school administrators in understanding the differences and commonalities of the three evaluation models. While discussing the three models, leading professionals in education and other professions, will be able to understand the impact teacher evaluation models have on students/children and teachers, specifically in early childhood settings.

How Are Early Childhood Teachers Evaluated?

Instruments and strategies to evaluate early childhood teachers are being developed and expanded upon to address increased teacher accountability because the role of early childhood teachers is becoming increasingly multifaceted (Agbenyega, 2012). However, there is a lack of professional consensus regarding internal quality control in early childhood settings (Darling-Hammond, 2010). There is also a lack of implementation consistency among and between districts and states regarding teacher evaluation models and instruments. In one study, preschool teachers reported that they were not accurately assessed through an evaluation method because it was not designed specifically for preschool teachers (Lazzari & Bruder, 1988). Therefore, teacher evaluation models are being created, studied, and improved upon.

Teacher evaluations models are ways to support student growth by reinforcing high expectations, defining a clear set of priorities, and creating a common language for best practice (The New Teacher Project, 2014). Researchers have studied evaluation models, including observation, feedback and self-reflection strategies. They have studied these models separately and in conjunction with each other. These strategies have been studied as a way to evaluate preschool teachers' ability to interact socially with students, assist in the development of students' social emotional development, and encourage students to succeed academically.

Observation

Observation has been a foundational strategy and influential measurement tool in early childhood classrooms for more than three-decades (Gage & Needels, 1989; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). It is a way to observe classroom environments and teacher-child interactions (Pianta, 2012). The information gathered during an observation is not provided as a feedback tool, but rather a verbatim of what occurred during the observation. It has been found and stated that, "placing observation of actual teaching as a central feature of accountability frameworks, teacher preparation… could result in substantial improvements in instruction and related social" interactions (Pianta & Hamre, 2009, p. 109). Therefore, observations have implications for administrative decisions, evaluation practices, and policymaking (Pianta, 2012).

The instruments for observation that are being studied, implemented, and improved upon are in response to a specific heading in the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) application. As part of the application and fund allocation requirements, states are required to allocate a portion of the funds received to a specified system designed to increase the workforce or professionalism of early childhood educators. The "workforce" heading in the RTT-ELC is being met by variations of the Quality Rating and Improvement System

(QRIS) (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Each QRIS model involves areas that are hypothesized to be part of a "quality early learning environment" including teacher interactions. As defined by the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) the QRIS is a system that was developed and implemented as part of a larger conversation regarding the definition of what makes a high-quality early learning environment (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2013).

As part of the early learning challenge and implementation of the QRIS, there is one instrument, the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), which is being used more prevalently to evaluate the foundational pieces of classroom environments, including interactions that create optimal learning environments (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004; Office of Head Start National Centers, 2013). One topic within optimal learning environments is teacher-child interactions, which is seen through observations.

Research has shown that when the CLASS is used to evaluate classroom environments, which can be completed by a peer or administrator, teachers are able to stimulate peer conversations. These peer conversations are then used to facilitate the development of language skills through well-planned schedules and to develop other quality learning strategies through brainstorming (Howes et al., 2008). Teacher-child interactions that are intentionally planned support the argument that quality early childhood classrooms promote learning of academic skills, as evident in research (Howes et al., 2008; Bogner, Raphael, & Pressley, 2002).

Observers using the CLASS to observe and evaluate the teacher-student interactions categorize the interactions into three broad categories that include emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. The three specified categories are then broken down even further into two subcategories that include "positive climate" and "concept development." Both of these dimensions focus on teachers' interactions with children. The positive climate relates to teachers' interactions with children that create an enjoyable classroom atmosphere. The concept development focuses on teachers' interactions as students develop higher-order thinking skills. Researchers have shown that structured observation tools, such as the CLASS, serve a purpose when evaluating early childhood teachers (Downer et al., 2012).

In one research study, the researchers used the CLASS as a way to investigate the minimum level of preschool quality needed for children to show an increase in their academic, behavioral, and memory skills in a rural area (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, Vitiello, Greenberg, & The Family Life Project Key Investigators, 2013). One of the purposes of the CLASS, as indicated earlier, was to create a way to measure teacher-student interactions. Therefore, in this study, researchers used the CLASS and found that increases in positive behaviors, as evident through teacher-child interactions, were associated with higher-quality classrooms. In this study, the researchers did not find a direct correlation between high quality preschool settings and academics, however there was a correlation found for quality preschool and positive behaviors (Burchinal et al., 2013).

A second observation instrument, which has been outlined by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Planning, Research, and Education (OPRE), is the Teacher Observation in Preschools (TOP). The TOP is used to observe teachers' and assistants' behaviors in preschool classrooms and is associated with the research-based curriculum, Tools of the Mind (Tools of the Mind, 2014). This observational instrument is frequently linked to the research-based curriculum, Tools of the Mind. At the preschool level, Tools of Mind is "an instructional strategy used to promote the development of self-regulation" (www.toolsofmind.org). The TOP "is a system for observing teachers' and assistants' behaviors in preschool classrooms across a day-long visit" (Bilbrey, Vorhaus, Farran, & Shufelt, 2010) and is always used in conjunction with the Child Observation in Preschool (COP) (Farran & Son-Yarbrough, 2001). An observer using the TOP observational instrument gathers snapshots of teachers' and assistants' behaviors to present a picture of how the teachers and assistants are spending time in a classroom (Bilbrey et al., 2010). It is a way to "understand the classroom environment in terms of the teacher's behaviors" (Fuhs, Farran, & Nesbitt, 2013, p. 350.)

A third observational instrument, also outlined by OPRE, is the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool for Preschool Classrooms (TPOT). The TPOT "is an instrument designed to measure the fidelity of implementation of practices associated with the Pyramid Model (Hemmeter, Fox, & Synder, 2008). The Teaching Pyramid, on which TPOT is based from, is "a framework for supporting social-emotional development and preventing and addressing challenging behaviors" (Branson & Demchak, 2011, p. 196) in preschool classrooms. In other words, the TPOT is an instrument that measures the extent to which an intervention or program is practiced in a classroom, specifically related to the social-emotional development of preschool children.

The TPOT is completely based on an observation conducted in a preschool classroom and an interview with the teacher. A trained administrator of this observational instrument provides information on how well teachers are implementing practices related to universal, targeted, and individualized supports. The observer or administrator gained detailed information fourteen key teaching practices, environmental items, and notes any red flags that would indicate there is immediate support that is needed. The focus of TPOT is to

understand what teachers need to focus on to ensure positive social-emotional outcomes for young children. Using the TPOT as an observational instrument, it is recommended that the observation should last at least two hours and include both teacher-directed and child-directed activities.

A fourth instrument used to observe in preschool classrooms is the 43 item Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) which released in 1998 (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2014). However, Harms and Clifford designed the first ECERS in 1980. The ECERS was "designed to assess group programs for preschool-kindergarten aged children" (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2014). The ECERS revised edition "contains inclusive and culturally sensitive indicators" and new items have been added to include classroom interactions (Environment Rating Scales Institute, 2014). In general, rating scales developed on early childhood settings at any level evaluate the process quality in the setting or the experiences children have in the setting through interactions (Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997). Researchers have found the best way to assess process quality is through observation, therefore environmental rating scales were developed. This instrument is currently being used in major studies around the United Stated, including Federal Research projects with Head Start and State research projects (Clifford, Reszka, & Rossbach, 2010).

Finally, the Program Quality Assessment (PQA) is also an instrument used in preschool classrooms for teacher evaluations and is associated with the research-based curriculum, High Scope (High Scope, 2014). The PQA is a 63-dimension evaluation instrument with 7 domains, including adult-child interactions. The designed purpose of the PQA is to evaluate "the quality of early childhood programs and identify staff training needs" (High Scope, 2014). On the High Scope website it is stated that the Preschool PQA "is reliable and valid and is appropriate for use in all center-based early childhood settings" (High Scope, 2014). The PQA was designed to recognize strengths and detect areas for improvement as evaluators and teachers work together to make a better environment for the students and families they serve (High Scope, 2014).

Feedback

Observation alone is one-way administrators, teachers, researchers, and data collectors can evaluate preschool teachers. One research, Avalos (2011), reviewed ten years of publications focusing on teacher professional development. Through that review of literature the researcher discovered that peer feedback, either formal or informal, could provide construction professional development through both questioning and supporting the teacher's self-assessment (Avalos, 2011). Although, in order to constructively support and compete a teacher's self-assessment, feedback many times must be used in conjunction with observation. When observation and feedback are used together, results yield improved implementation of a teacher strategy in subsequent observations (Alvero, Bucklin, & Austin, 2001; Balcazar, Hopkins, & Suarez, 1985).

Feedback is when the assessor focuses on one specific area of the teacher's classroom and provides feedback. The feedback can be verbal, written, or displayed in a graph for interpretation (Agbenyega, 2012; Barton & Wolery, 2007; Casey & McWilliam, 2008, 2011; McFarland, Saunders, & Allen, 2009; Wright, Ellis, & Baxter, 2012). Quality and structured feedback is considered by some researchers to be essential when creating an encouraging environment for early childhood teachers (Casey & McWilliam, 2011; Pianta, 2012). The feedback provides the teacher with an opportunity to reflect and improve their practice to increase student success.

Casey and McWilliam (2011), two well-known researchers in the field of teacher evaluation feedback, conducted a review of literature. Their literature review was on performance feedback, which is "verbal, written, or graphical feedback about their (teacher) implementation of an intervention during an observation in an effort to improve their implementation during subsequent observations" (Casey & McWilliam, 2011, p. 68). The results from this literature review support the notion that schools, agencies, states, individuals, and communities all implement different types of teacher evaluation systems, however feedback yields positive results.

Prior to completing their review of literature regarding performance feedback, Casey and McWilliam (2008) conducted a study focusing on graphical feedback. Graphical feedback is when assessors focus on one area of teaching. Graphical feedback is a specific type of feedback that displays quantitative information about individuals' past performance to influence future performance (Leach & Conto, 1999). Researchers have used graphical feedback as a way to monitor specific teaching strategies. For example, Casey and McWilliam (2008), use graphical feedback as a way to measure the teacher's use of incidental learning in a classroom, which is "interactions on children's existing engagement to expand children's participant or encourage their use of more sophisticated behaviors" (Casey & McWilliam, 2008, p. 253). The results showed that, "presenting graphical feedback to teachers seemed to be effective in increasing the number of intervals in which they used incidental teaching with the target children" (Casey & McWilliam, 2008, p. 261). These results, while they cannot be generalized, can be replicated for future researchers to gain more understanding of graphical feedback, with brief verbal conversations.

Aside from graphical feedback, there is also emailed or written feedback as a way to communicate with the teacher being observed. In one study, Barton and Wolery (2007) used email feedback with preservice teachers who were in their student teaching semester. The observer sent emailed feedback to each participant within four hours after observing in the classroom. The focus teaching strategy for the feedback was expansion language. An example of "expansion language" is when a child says, "pancake" the teacher could use expansion language stating, "Yes, I have a pancake on my plate that I will eat." All three participants increased their use of "expansion language" once the intervention was introduced (Barton & Wolery, 2007).

The second experiment was a systematic replication of the first experiment. By creating a systematic replication of the first experiment, researchers attempted to replicate the experiment, but added new variables and changed some criterion. The researchers added the dimension of measuring child statements that did not result in an expansion (Barton & Wolery, 2007). They also expanded their focus to include the measure of "missed opportunities" for expansion between a teacher and child. A "missed opportunity" is when a teacher misses a cue from a student to expand their language, as explained above. However, in the end, the second experiment had inconsistent results. Two of three participants responded well to the emails and increased their use of the specified language (Barton & Wolery, 2007). There are many outside factors to consider when implementing email feedback, including the investment and time constraints of participants. The researchers of these two studies advocate for future research endeavors that may include other aspects along with feedback for teacher evaluations (Barton & Wolery, 2007).

Graphical, written, and verbal feedback can go together and often accompany observations. Verbal feedback is a way to bring in the face-to-face, social interaction needed for quality evaluation models. Verbal feedback is a conversation between the observer and the teacher to ensure teachers understand what they are viewing on the graph (Casey & McWilliam, 2008).

Feedback, as part of the observational method, is considered by some researchers to be essential when creating an encouraging and high-quality preschool environment (Casey & McWilliam, 2011; Pianta, 2012). The feedback provides the teacher with an opportunity to reflect and improve their practice to increase student success. Feedback, also known as "good coaching" has the capability to improve teacher practice and programs (Guernsey & Ochshorn, 2011).

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is another type of evaluation method (Agbenyega, 2012; Ntuli, Keengwe, & Kyei-Blankson, 2009; O'Connor & Diggins, 2002; Wright et al., 2012). Self-reflection is generally defined as allowing "educators to distance themselves from their thoughts and actions, make sense of how and why particular practices worked or didn't work and use new understanding of these processes to adapt practices to be more effective in the future" (McFarland et al., p. 506). The purpose of self-reflection is to enable teachers to articulate their implicit and personal theories. They are able to question contradictory beliefs and process their practice. Reflection creates an environment where teachers want to change themselves, rather have change dictated to them (Wood & Bennett, 2000).

In general, self-reflection is a way for teachers to assess his/her own instruction performance, which is essential to improving teaching qualities and effectiveness (Beck, King, & Marshall, 2002; Capizzi, Wehby, & Sandemal, 2010; McFarland et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2012). Many times self-reflection is an ongoing process that reflects on the ever-changing practices in the classroom and self-questioning regarding effectiveness (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; McFarland et al., 2009; O'Connor & Diggins, 2002).

One type of self-reflection teachers may use is journaling (Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008). In one study, it was found that teachers are more willing to talk when they are writing a journal-like entry. The process of writing a journal has been found to help teachers transform and develop as professionals (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell Jones, 2004; Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009). While journaling, teachers are able to become aware of their practices and create problem-solving strategies and pedagogical interactions (Wood & Bennett, 2000).

While researchers have studied the actual act of self-reflection, other researchers have investigated teachers' perceptions of self-reflection. In one research study, pre-service teachers were asked to report their views on the self-reflection process during their practicum course (McFarland et al., 2009). Overall, the researchers of this study found that the act of self-reflection or self-assessment itself was the most important piece. Interestingly, the depth or detail to which the reflection was completed was unrelated to the effects. In other words, the researchers found that it did not matter how reflective the teacher was and to what extent the teacher reflected, but that they were going through the process of reflecting (McFarland et al., 2009). However, the researchers also found that pre-service teachers developed better self-assessment skills as they continued through the process of self-reflection. Overall, the participants found many benefits to developing self-reflection skills (McFarland et al., 2009).

In summation, research shows that providing information alone does not usually have an impact on teachers' behaviors in the classroom. Teachers need to be given support and held accountable (Rose & Church, 1998; Wade, 1985). Consequently, the three described

models of teacher evaluation can also be looked at in partnership with each other. It has been said that, "learning to practice in practice with expert guidance, is essential to becoming a great teacher of students with a wide range of needs" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 40). The ongoing process of observation, feedback, and self-reflection provide quality interactions and holds teachers accountable (Casey & McWilliam, 2011; Klein & Knitzer, 2006).

Implications

Early childhood teacher evaluation models are important, as outlined by the current Administration and other leading professionals. President Obama and Secretary Duncan advocate for high quality early learning environments for all four-year-old students in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Along with the President and Secretary of Education, policymakers, researchers, and educators are all focused on increasing student achievement, which is arguably accomplished with high-quality teacher accountability measures. High-quality early learning environments are currently being developed as RTT-ELC funds are allocated, specifically concentrating on states' QRIS models.

The QRIS systems are implementing accountability and evaluation models for early childhood teachers. As these systems are being developed, implemented, and studied, researchers are finding correlations between higher-quality early learning environments and teacher accountability measures associated with evaluations. Arizona is one state that has developed specific legislation and policies regarding early learning accountability measures. The Arizona's Quality First program has been developed to partner with early childhood providers to make quality improvements focusing on the workforce aspect of the RTT-ELC application, expanding early childhood teachers' knowledge and expertise in working with young children (Quality First, 2013). Other states are joining in Arizona's efforts by developing studies, programs, and legislation focusing on the importance of early learning environments, especially increasing the teacher force.

Future studies concentrating on evaluation models, both current and developing, will increase the workforce or professionalism in the early childhood field. Some in academia believe that increased accountability models in early childhood settings is the first step to increasing the social view of early childhood teachers as professionals and not babysitters. As QRIS models are being studied and workforces in early childhood environments are increasing, future studies may include teacher perceptions, administrator perceptions, and community perceptions of early childhood teachers. Educators and individuals in academia have indicated that as early childhood teaches increase certification requirements, including accountability measures, the perception of childcare settings will increase.

For decades early childhood teachers have been viewed as nurturing babysitters, rather than nurturing educators (Clark & Huber, 2005). As society changes and there are more households with two working parents, there will a bigger need for early learning environments for younger children. The discussion regarding the early learning workforce and accountability measures is beginning and will continue as RTT-ELC funds are allocated. The discussion regarding the importance of high-quality early learning environments will also continue and expand as national organizations develop and advocate for high quality early learning environments for all children around the United States. The discussion will also continue to expand as scientists and doctors continue to educate the public on the extensive, foundational, and important brain growth and development that occurs in the first few years of life, the early childhood years (World Bank, 2011). As more individuals become invested in early learning, accountability measures and evaluation models will continue to be studied, critiqued, and improved upon in order to create high-quality early learning environments for all four-year olds.

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