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Research Summary

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Quality Matters - Assessing the quality of early care settings in Cuyahoga County

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The quality of care in settings serving young children is a crucial concern in policy and practice circles as we seek ways to promote child development. This study was undertaken to assess the level of quality in regulated early care and education settings in and around Cleveland, Ohio. The study examined the structural and contextual factors associated with high quality care and was designed to inform a community-wide initiative focused on child well-being and school readiness. Observation and interview data were collected from 177 classrooms for 3-to-5 year olds chosen from a stratified random sample of child care centers in Cuyahoga County. On average, the sample of center-based classrooms scored in the medium range of quality on the scale. Some differences by type of program were apparent, with Head Start and private Child Care programs having better provisions for learning than preschool programs while preschool classrooms tended to have higher scores on interactions. The administrative data suggest that the quality in family child care in Cuyahoga County has shown an upward trend in recent years.

CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

When parents seek child care research shows that the quality of care is a chief concern in their decision. Parents may expect that the marketplace will drive low quality providers out of business or that government entities that regulate early care establishments will ensure high quality services. While the government and the market certainly play a role in determining standards of child care quality, it's more complicated than that. Simply being able to identify and agree on what constitutes high quality of care is an area of considerable debate. Nevertheless, efforts to enhance the quality of early care settings are supported by research evidence and practical experience in the child care sector. In order to enhance quality, it is first necessary to have a good sense of the level and distribution of quality within the local service area.

On behalf of a coalition of foundations, nonprofits, care-providers and the Cuyahoga County Commissioners, Invest in Children (IIC), Cuyahoga County's Office of Early Childhood engaged the Center on Urban Poverty and Community

Development to assess the child care system and determine its diversity and capacity to serve our children. The impetus for this study was the County's desire to pursue a universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) strategy to enhance early care in the region. The main goal for this study was to understand the current and projected status of the early care system in the County. The study was conducted collaboratively by researchers at the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University and the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The present study asks three questions: (1) what are the characteristics of the centers, classrooms, and teachers serving preschool-aged children in Cuyahoga County and how do they differ across programs?, (2) what is the quality of early care and education practices, including the environment, activities, and teacher-child interactions?, and (3) how do center, classroom, and teacher characteristics relate to the quality of care observed in these classrooms?

The study shows that the quality of care does vary and that efforts to enhance quality should take into account a variety of factors.

METHODS

The study has two components, one focused on center-based care and the other focused on care in family child care settings. Observation and interview data were collected from a sample of 177 classrooms for 3-to-5 year olds chosen from a stratified random sample of child care centers in Cuyahoga County, 88 private child care classrooms, 59 private preschool classrooms, and 30 Head Start classrooms (Figure 1). No public preschool classrooms were involved in the study. Data were collected between June and December 2006 by trained observers using two standardized assessment instruments – the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) and the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS). The quality of care in family child care homes was examined through a review of extant data on home-based quality from a previous research study, and administrative data on quality used to guide technical assistance and assess provider performance. The data from a previous research study (2001-2003) were collected on a sample of 95 homes by trained observers using the previously mentioned instruments. The administrative data were collected by technical assistance staff and external consultants using the Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCRS) on approximately 600-800 homes annually during

2001-2006. Data collectors in the two different efforts were well-trained, but reliability was not assessed, so comparisons should be made very cautiously.

RESULTS

Center Based Care Quality: On

average, classrooms scored in the medium range of quality on the ECERS-R, with a mean total score of 4.4 on the 7-point scale. The study used scales measuring the sensitivity, harshness, detachment and permissiveness of the interactions. Higher scores on sensitivity indicate higher quality interactions while higher quality is indicated by lower scores for the other three factors. The average score on the CIS was 3.4 on a 4-point scale, indicating that teachers' interactions with children were of fairly high quality. Scores were relatively high on the Sensitivity (2.9) scale and relatively low on the Harshness (1.4), Detachment (1.3), and Permissiveness (1.2) scales, reflecting a pattern associated with higher quality of care.

Some differences in quality by type of program were found, with Head Start having the highest proportion of high quality classrooms and no classrooms of low quality (Table 1). In general, Head Start and private Child Care programs were found to have better material provisions for learning than Preschool programs. However, Preschool classrooms tended to have higher scores on the quality of the interactions between the teacher and the children. The lower scores in Preschool programs may be due in part to the difficulty of providing adequate amounts of time for a variety of activities in part-day programs, as delineated for developmentally appropriate practices. Preschool programs scored lower on such items, including furnishings for relaxation and comfort, gross motor equipment, art activities, block play, sand/water play, dramatic play, schedule, and free play. These may be areas to particularly focus on for quality improvement, especially as related to part-day programs.

Classrooms in the low quality range should also be a special focus of quality improvement efforts. Resources will be needed for quality improvement programs, including professional development via training and consultation; grants for purchase of needed materials, supplies, and curricula; and/or stipend programs to entice good teachers to stay in the field. In considering quality improvement strategies, it will be important to tailor the

Table 1. ECERS-R Distributions of Classrooms by Center Type

	Low (<3)	Medium (3-4.9)	High (>=5)
Private Preschool	13.6%	61.0%	25.4%
Head Start	0%	56.7%	43.3%
Private Child Care	18.2%	47.7%	34.1%
All	13.6%	53.7%	32.8%

Source: Sample data, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

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professional development, both in terms of content and frequency, to the varying needs of different classrooms as well as different types of programs.

Although some recent research questions whether teacher education levels are significantly correlated with more effective use of developmentally appropriate practices, education appears to be important in this study population. Higher teacher education levels were predictive of better overall classroom quality. Teachers with a 2-year or 4-year degree had, on average, better ECERS-R scores than did teachers with less education. In addition, some teacher beliefs—less traditional childrearing and more developmentally appropriate attitudes—are related to higher quality classroom scores. The results on teacher beliefs suggest that further training about appropriate practices coupled with an understanding of the reasoning behind them (based on child development and educational approaches) may be beneficial.

Home Based Care Quality: The quality of care in family child care homes in Cuyahoga

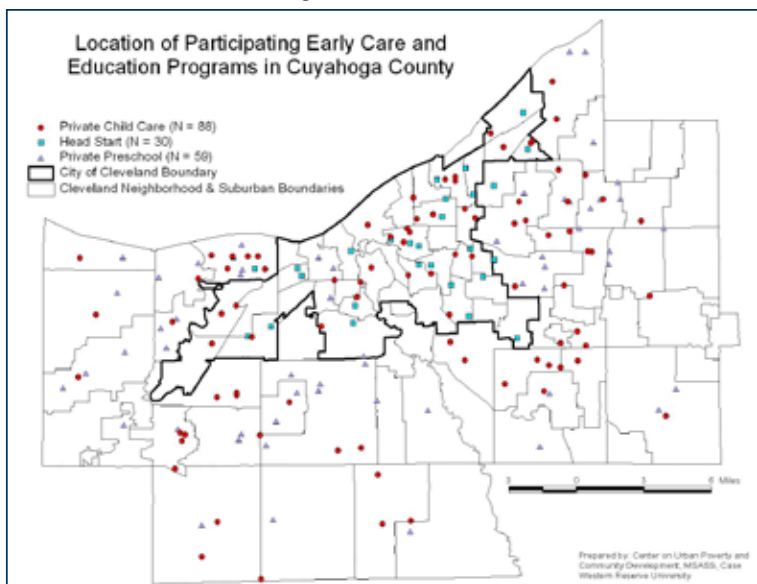
County has generally been in the poor range, and increasing that has been challenging. Data from a previous study of 95 homes showed care in the poor range on average in 2001-2002 and remaining in the poor range when re-assessed in 2003. The new data reviewed for this study, however, suggest that the quality in family child care in Cuyahoga County has potentially increased somewhat in recent years. The mean quality score increased by 22% between 2001 and 2006. The data available on the higher quality providers is likely more reliable given the verification procedure used for this group. Though many home-based providers do struggle with providing high quality care, the number of providers offering high-quality care is substantial and growing.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings from this study provide both a snapshot of the quality of care in Cuyahoga County, as well as a basis for planning quality enhancement strategies going forward. Given the credible evidence that the structural quality of care in these settings is predictive of improved child development, a continued policy and practice focus on quality is warranted. This will require continued monitoring of care quality as a way to benchmark progress and make refinements. Based on this and other work, Cuyahoga County launched a UPK pilot program in fall 2007 involving slots for 1,000 preschoolers at 24 care sites in the County. The pilot includes a monitoring and evaluation component which collects data on the services provided as well as longitudinal data on a sample of 200 children enrolled in care. Results from this study will be forthcoming in mid 2009.

Peisner-Feinberg, E., Bryant, D., Fischer, R., & Grayson, L. (2008). *Cuyahoga County Child Care Quality Study*. Cleveland, OH: Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University. February.

Figure 1. Location of Participating Early Care and Education Programs



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Research summaries from
the Center on Urban Poverty
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Founded in 1988 as the Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, the Center changed its name in 2006 to the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development. The Center's commitment to addressing the issues of urban poverty remains at the core of its work, as does a commitment to social change. The new name emphasizes the means through which such change must take place.

The Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development seeks to address the problems of persistent and concentrated urban poverty and is dedicated to understanding how social and economic changes affect low-income communities and their residents. Based in Cleveland at Case Western Reserve University's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, the Center views the city as both a laboratory for building communities and producing change locally, and as a representative urban center from which nationally relevant research and policy implications can be drawn.

A community resource for expertise and data analysis for nearly 20 years, the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development created the groundbreaking community data system NEO CANDO (Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing), a web-based tool that centralizes a broad array of indicators, making it easier to overlay and analyze disparate data. Community development corporations, foundation program officers, local governments, neighborhood activists and residents, students at the Mandel School and other institutions, the media, community reinvestment professionals and academic researchers are among those who have found NEO CANDO invaluable in their work. The Center conducts extensive training and maintains a listserv so NEO CANDO users can get the most out of its vast data collection. You can visit the NEO CANDO webpage at <http://neocando.case.edu>.



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