

Assessing Classroom Quality in Settings Serving Young Dual Language Learners

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Increasingly federal and state governments view quality preschool education as a critical component in closing the achievement gap for minority children. A high quality preschool experience enhances early school performance and is associated with a variety of positive adolescent and adult outcomes (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006; Nores, Barnett, Belfield, & Schweinhart, 2005). Because studies of preschool quality have suggested that the vast majority of programs are deemed mediocre (Helburn, 1995), discussion of expansion focuses on the relationship between “high quality” preschool experiences and consequences for children. Thus, there is considerable interest in not only identifying what constitutes a quality preschool experience but also how best to measure it.

Within the preschool population, children whose home language is not English, is growing. It is projected that by 2020 young preschool age children who are exposed to two or more languages (here called Dual Language Learners, DLLs)) will be larger than their monolingual counterparts (Maxwell, 2013). However, very little research exists with regards to the meaning and measurement of quality education and care for young Dual Language Learners. In a literature review commissioned by the Center for Early Care and Education Research, researchers could only locate 10 research studies that addressed the issue of quality for DLLs (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2014). This review examined various measures of classroom or childcare setting quality with predominantly Spanish speaking child populations and concluded that the currently used ECE classroom quality assessments operate similarly for DLLs and children who are monolingual English speakers. Specifically, they found no differences in the quality of experiences, psychometric properties or associations with child outcome indices for DLLs when compared to monolingual children. Yet, in spite of these conclusions, the authors state that studies that included measures specifically designed for DLLs appear to assess different aspects of quality. They note, "DLL-specific measures may be sensitive to assessing aspects of quality that are particularly important for DLLs" (p798).

Is good quality for all, good quality for DLLs?

There are a number of factors that contribute to the widespread notion that what is good for all children should be good for subsets of children such as DLLs. First, child development theory and research posits that there are universal

psychological processes that all humans experience (Kitayama & Markus, 1996; Overton, 2003). The major implication of this universalistic perspective for understanding measures of early education quality is the belief that good quality for all children will result in positive outcomes regardless of a child's background characteristics. Second, researchers and evaluators engaged in examining the development of young DLLs are just beginning to appreciate important distinctions that need to be made in understanding the development of children learning two languages at a young age (See Castro et al., 2013 for a review). As a result, the research and evaluation expertise that exists is working from an incomplete knowledge base about such important elements as how to accurately identify a DLL, what specific instructional accommodations are salient for DLLs and what, if any, assessment tools are relevant and appropriate.

Much of what we know about the development of young DLL children is based on secondary analysis of children where the samples were not drawn with the idea of specifically understanding the development of dual language learners. There are some notable instances of this such as the Early Childhood Kindergarten Longitudinal Study (ECKLs, 1998-99) and the Multi-State Study of Pre-kindergarten and the Statewide Early Education Programs Study (SWEEP). For example, ECKLs has repeatedly been examined for understanding the academic achievement of DLLs (see work of Galindo, 2010; Rumberger, & Tran, 2006). However, this particular data set is problematic for understanding DLLs due to the elimination of kindergarten children who did not pass the English screener. Although some eliminated children were subsequently included in the remainder of the study when their English proficiency was sufficient in order to be tested, their initial omission was unfortunate for our understanding of the early learning trajectory of children who began school not knowing English.

What has resulted from secondary analysis of ECKL data for DLLs is a mixed picture of their strengths and weakness contingent on how the researcher identified a child as a DLL and their particular research methodology. Because researchers used a variety of ways to 'identify' DLLs, ECKLs studies are measuring somewhat different children under the label of dual language learner or English language learner. This confusion is noted in a recent literature review of socio-emotional development in young DLLs where the authors state, "Studies using the same dataset yielded multiple conclusions about the relationship between English language proficiency and their internalizing and externalizing behavior" (p.742).

We should not be surprised at the ad hoc nature of research on DLLs in child development and early childhood education. This situation reflects a larger historical perspective on minority children and specific minority subgroups that views their development not for its own uniqueness and characteristics but rather as it relates to a universal norm. In the case of classroom quality, its indices are drawn from what is considered positive teacher behavior that is good for all children regardless of their backgrounds. In 1981 John Ogbu cautioned the child

development community about studying minority group children for their own sake and not within a comparative vein which often left them appearing deficient (Ogbu, 1981). Since that time, there has been a growing recognition in developmental psychology and early childhood education that development is highly influenced by language and culture (Rogoff, 2003) and a culturally and linguistically specific perspective is especially important for young DLLs whose life experiences may often be qualitatively different from those of U.S. monolingual English speaking children.

Methods and Data Sources

Currently, there are several widely used measures of classroom quality in use and proponents posit that their use is appropriate in classrooms with dual language learners (DLLs) (Burchinal, & Cryer, 2003; Downer, Lopez, Grimm, Hamaguri, Pianta et al., 2012). However this claim is not well grounded in either theory or research relevant to the development of dual language learners. This paper critically evaluates the two most widely used assessments of classroom quality: the Environmental Rating System (ERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) as measures of classroom quality for young DLLs.

This data source for this critique is drawn from the opinions of both experts and practitioners who collaborate under the auspices of the Campaign for Quality Early Care (CQEE), and who collaborates as a member of Californians Together, a statewide coalition committed to securing equal access to quality education for all children.

This review centers on four criteria: the purposes of the assessment, the content of the assessment, psychometric properties, and assessor competence in assessment administration of the two most widely used classroom quality measures: the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

Description of ECERS and CLASS and their purpose

The ECERS was the first classroom observation measure developed to rate the quality of early care and education settings. The original ECERS was published in 1980 (Harms, & Clifford, 1980) and was the culmination of efforts to quantify and evaluate components of early care and education settings that were identified by experts to be appropriate. There have been two revisions of the ECERS through the years with the most current version published 2015. The present critique centers on the ECERS-R (2004), which contains 43 items, organized into 7 subscales: space and furnishing, personal care routines, language and reasoning, activities, interactions, program structure and parents and staff. The ECERS developers state that many of the subscale items contain indicators that focuses on inclusivity and cultural sensitivity.

The CLASS is an observation instrument that concentrates on teacher-child interaction as an overall index of classroom quality. Its development is rooted in its different iterations used in various research studies such as the Multistate Study of Prekindergarten (Early, et al, 2005). The CLASS instrument is organized around the three domains of Emotional Support, Classroom Organization and Instructional Support. Within each domain specific dimensions are scored on a 7-point scale with a score of 1 and 2 considered low and a score of 6 and 7 considered in the high range. Dimension scores are averaged to arrive at an overall domain score. The CLASS tool is premised on the notion that positive child outcome is highly correlated with effective teacher-child interaction. The CLASS instrument has been widely adopted by both the Office of Head Start and states involved with early childhood quality improvement efforts.

Content of the Assessment

ECERS

The ERS-R (2004) was reviewed by coalition members for its appropriateness for use in classrooms with DLLs. The developers of ERS-R contend that the rating scale is appropriate for use in inclusive and culturally diverse programs (see Environmental Rating website). An item-by-item review of the ERS-R was conducted to ascertain which items addressed cultural and linguistic diversity and would be helpful in improving teaching environments for DLLs. In general, few, if any, items focused on cultural and/or linguistic diversity. Table 1 highlights those items that note classroom practice where culture or language differences are rated. Out of 43 items there are 6 items that are explicit in the incorporation of language and cultural differences. The ERS-R contains a number of other items where cultural and linguistic sensitivity on the part of early childhood staff may influence a specific rating. For example on item 9, greeting and departing, staff could use the primary language of the parent to communicate about the child's day. However, the ERS-R does not specifically note the use of the parent's home language for the greeting and departing item and thus this rating would be dependent upon the observer's best judgment.

CLASS

Although the developers of the CLASS state that there maybe elements of instruction that may be critical for a particular cultural group that are not included in the CLASS measure, they maintain that the tool is appropriate for use in classrooms with DLLs (Vitiello, 2012).

An item-by-item review within all class dimensions was conducted and it was concluded that the interpretation of many of the items would be different if examined through the lens of what is culturally and linguistically appropriate for DLLs. Within each CLASS domain there are items where a universalistic

perspective of child development may conflict with the behavior of DLLs who may have been socialized to expect different patterns of adult-child interaction. Whereas mainstream values support the development of autonomy and independence in young children, DLLs coming from home backgrounds that stress a collectivistic and/or an interdependent focus, may not understand teacher expectations or behaviors that are incongruent. Table 2 illustrates some examples from each domain. Constructs that are questionable are bolded.

Within the Emotional Support Domain, Teacher Sensitivity for DLLs may be difficult to assess if the teacher does not understand or speak the primary language of the child. In the Classroom Organization Domain - Behavior Management, how children understand 'good behavior' may be qualitatively different for DLL children whose socialization histories emphasize interdependence and responsibility to the group (See the work of Rothstein-Fisch, & Trumbull, 2008). The Instructional Support Domain has received the most attention with respect to the appropriateness of CLASS for DLLs. In particular the area of Concept Development has been acknowledged by CLASS developers as requiring differential interpretation for children learning English as a second language (Teachstone, 2013). For example, the indicator of advanced language may demonstrate more simple concepts for teachers working with DLL versus monolingual English speaking children.

Predictive Validity

As classroom quality measures are being used as proxy measures for child outcomes (Guernsey, & Ochshorn, 2011) it is important to understand the relationship between specific classroom rating measures and child outcome for DLLs. The focus of this section is on how well the ERS-R and CLASS tools predict child outcome for children whose primary language is not English. For the ERS-R no empirical evidence could be located for its use with young DLLs. A somewhat related study examined ERS-R use with children from different ethnic/racial groups and concluded that ERS-R functioned similarly for white, African-American and Hispanic children whose primary language was English (Burchinal, & Cryer (2003) in the areas of math, literacy and social skills. In a secondary analysis where DLL children were compared with non-DLL children, researchers using the CLASS concluded that its structure and predictive validity applied equally well across preschool classrooms with different DLL compositions (Downer, Lopez, Grimm, Hamaguri, Pianta et al., 2012). Specifically, child outcomes in math, language/literacy and social skills for both DLLs and non-DLLs were similar at the end of preschool leading researchers to conclude that CLASS can be used in linguistically diverse preschool settings.

With both the aforementioned studies, there are important limitations. First, both investigations are based on large, multistate studies in which DLLs were not the main focus of the research. Second, in the Downer et al., (2012) study, DLL status is not well defined, and there is no information reported regarding the

bilingual capacity of assessors. When DLL children are the primary focus of the relationship between CLASS ratings to child outcomes, there is unpublished data that suggests that there is no association between all subscales and child outcomes in Spanish (Lopez, Arango, & Ferron, 2012) and no association between any of the subscales of the CLASS and child outcomes in English for Latino DLLs in preschool (Lopez, personal communication). Further, evidence from a study of upper elementary grade Hispanic children, 42% who were classified as English learners, found that although the CLASS tool could predict achievement outcome for non-Hispanic students, it was not predictive of Hispanic students on state achievement measures (Lopez, 2011).

Assessor Competence

When utilizing classroom observation measures with diverse populations, the cultural and linguistic competency of the assessor is paramount for accurate evaluation of classroom quality. Ideally the assessor should be knowledgeable of child development and early childhood practice and have an eye for detail in order to deconstruct teacher-child interaction and interpret pedagogical practice. In addition, assessors observing classrooms with DLLs should know the primary language of the children and be familiar with their culture. Although challenging, given our present early childhood workforce capacity and the diversity of languages and cultures, it is nonetheless important to have competent assessors to ensure fair and equitable evaluation. It is interesting to note that the qualifications of assessors (e.g., bilingual/bicultural) are not described in research studies focused on DLLs thus raising questions about the application of the research tool.

Discussion

Measures of classroom quality developed for particular research projects are being used across a variety of early childhood efforts (Bryant, 2010). Yet, the current measures were not developed with the unique needs of young dual language learners in mind. Because of this, current measures overlook important features of the pedagogical environment salient for improved child outcome in this population. The present critique constitutes a 'face validity' analysis of the relevance of two existing classroom quality measures for helping teachers improve pedagogy for dual language learners.

The primary criticism of the ERS and the CLASS for use with DLL populations is that it has incomplete construct validity (Messick, 1989) and its consequential validity (Welner, 2013) for programs serving DLLs is of concern. In the present era of accountability, ERS and CLASS are being used to determine continued funding for early education. This is especially true in the case of Head Start where programs in the bottom 10% of national ratings on CLASS are automatically subject to re-competition. In addition, assessor training and oversight is not systematically addressed in research literature. According to the

National Research Council's report on assessment in early childhood, assessors should be given sufficient training and support to ensure accurate and reliable results (Snow, & Van Hemel, 2008). By overlooking how language and culture can affect teacher and child interactions the overall construct of classroom quality is not captured for a large proportion of the child population. This may be the partial reason for the lack of association located by Lopez, Arango and Ferron (2012) and Lopez (2011).

In early childhood education there is a history of environmental measures demonstrating differential predictive validity for different populations. Case in point is the HOME Observation for Measurement of the Environment Inventory (HOME) that examined child outcomes for African-American, White and Mexican-American children. It was found that the HOME significantly predicted cognitive performance for African-American and White children but for Mexican-American children, some of whom were likely DLLs, the results were not significant (Bradley et al., 1989).

In the Peisner-Feinberg et al., (2014) review of classroom quality measures for DLLs they conclude that classroom quality measures function equally well for monolingual and DLL populations. However, they point out that measures developed specifically for DLLs may capture different dimensions of quality than general measures. The controversy about the appropriateness of widely used classroom quality measures is a reflection of the broader discussion regarding the understanding and incorporation of diverse children's background qualities for improved pedagogical practice. Although high quality classrooms benefit both monolingual and DLLs, it has been argued that practices associated with here-to-fore definitions of quality may not be sufficient to support analogous levels of academic success for children who begin their lives speaking a language other than English (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2013). As classroom quality measures influence the content of teacher education and professional development (See National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning), the specific needs of DLLs are overlooked. Given the growing population of young DLLs across the nation, the time has come to consider the addition of quality measures specifically designed with DLLs in mind.

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Table 1

ERS-R Items where Culture/Language is Noted

| Personal Care Routines | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Item 9 | Greeting and departing | 5.1 Use child's primary language spoken at home to say "hello" |
| Language and Reasoning | | |
| Item 15 | Books and pictures | 5.4 books in children's primary language |
| Item 16 | Encouraging children to communicate | <i>Notes for Clarification</i> Children....speaking a primary language different from the primary language of classroom require different methods to encourage communication. Suitable activities must be included for children speaking a different primary language.... |
| Activities | | |
| Item 21 | Music/Movement | 5.2 Various types of music are used with children (Ex. music characteristic of different cultures) |
| Item 24 | Dramatic play | 7.2 Props provided to represent diversity (Ex. props representing various cultures) |
| Item 28 | Promoting acceptance of diversity | 7.1 Inclusion of diversity is part of daily routines and play activities (EX. ethnic foods are a regular part of meals; music from different cultures included at music time) 7.2 Activities included to promote understanding and acceptance of diversity (Ex. parents are encouraged to share family customs with children) |

Table 2

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

| ES: Teacher Sensitivity | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| | Low (1, 2) | Middle (3, 4, 5) | High (6, 7) | COMMENT |
| Awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipates problems and plans appropriately Notices lack of understanding and/ or difficulties | The teacher consistently fails to be aware of students who need extra support, assistance or attention. | The teacher is sometimes aware of students who need extra support, assistance or attention | The teacher is consistently aware of students who need extra support, assistance or attention | Coder must know the child's home language in order to code accurately. Is the teacher overlooking child because they cannot communicate with them? What should observers be looking at to make that assessment for DLL children. |
| Responsiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledges emotions Provides comfort and assistance Provides individualized support | The teacher is unresponsive to or dismissive of students and provides the same level of assistance to all students regardless of their individual needs. | The teacher is responsive to students sometimes but at other times is more dismissive or unresponsive, matching her support to the needs and abilities of some students but not others. | The teacher is consistently responsive to students and matches her support to their needs and abilities. | If the teacher does not speak the child's language, or know the culture, how will the observer know if the teacher is providing comfort and support? What about gender issues? |
| Addresses Problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps in an effective and timely manner Helps resolve problems | The teacher is ineffective at addressing students' problems and concerns. | The teacher is sometimes effective at addressing students' problems and concerns. | The teacher is consistently effective at addressing students' problems and concerns | How problems are resolved may be dependent on cultural values (e.g., the importance of sharing and helping). |
| Student Comfort <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks support and guidance Freely participates Takes risks | <p>The students rarely seek support, share their ideas with, or respond to questions from the teacher.</p> <p>More typical behaviors for the child...</p> | The student sometimes seek support from, share their ideas with, or respond to questions from the teacher. | The students appear comfortable seeking support from sharing their ideas with, and responding freely to the teacher. | A child's response is dependent on the teacher's ability to respond to child cues. If the teacher does not have the language cultural match or does not understand the cultural cue, then it will more difficult to interpret child's behavior |

CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION

| CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION: Behavior Management | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| | Low (1, 2) | Middle (3, 4, 5) | High (6, 7) | COMMENT |
| (CO) Clear Behavior Expectations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear expectations • Consistency • Clarity of rules | Rules and expectations are absent, unclear, or inconsistently enforced. | Rules and expectations may be stated clearly but are inconsistently enforced. | Rules and expectations for behaviors are clear and consistently enforced. | Rules are culturally appropriate, teacher “accommodates” different behaviors for DLL children (allow for interruptions, buddies, “side talk” so that child can get information/express self) |
| (CO) Proactive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipates of problem behavior or escalation • Low reactivity • Monitors | The teacher is reactive, and monitoring is absent or ineffective. | The teacher uses a mix of proactive and reactive responses; sometimes she monitors and reacts to early indicators of behavior problems but other times misses or ignores them | The teacher is consistently proactive and monitors classroom effectively to prevent problems from developing. | |
| (CO) Redirection of Misbehavior <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective reduction of misbehavior • Attention to the positive • Uses subtle cues to redirect • Efficient redirection | Attempts to redirect misbehavior are ineffective; the teacher rarely focuses on positive or uses subtle cues. As a result, misbehavior continues and/or escalates and takes time away from learning. | Some of the teacher’s attempts to redirect misbehavior are effective, particularly when he or she focuses on positives and uses subtle cues. As a result, misbehavior rarely continues, escalates, or takes time away from learning | The teacher effectively redirects misbehavior by focusing on positive and making use of subtle cues. Behavior management does not take time away from learning. | Features of redirection are culturally nuanced. How the child is redirected, is influenced by culture, for example, “saving face”. Making sure that both children have a win/win outcome. |
| (CO) Student Behavior <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent compliance • Little aggression and defiance | There are frequent instances of misbehavior in the classroom | There are periodic episodes of misbehavior in the classroom. | There are few, if any instances of student misbehavior in the classroom | “Misbehavior” is understood from a culturally appropriate lens and the intervention and redirection appropriate. |

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

| INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT: Concept Development | | | | COMMENT |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| | Low (1, 2) | Middle (3, 4, 5) | High (6, 7) | |
| Analysis and reasoning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why and/or how questions • Problem solving • Prediction and experimentation • Classification and comparison • Evaluating | The teacher rarely uses discussions and activities that encourage analysis and reasoning. | The teacher occasionally uses discussions and activities that encourage analysis and reasoning. | The teacher often uses discussions and activities that encourage analysis and reasoning. | |
| Creating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorming • Planning • Producing | The teacher rarely uses discussions and activities that encourage analysis and reasoning. | The teacher occasionally uses discussions and activities that encourage analysis and reasoning. | The teacher often uses discussions and activities that encourage analysis and reasoning. | |
| Integration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect concepts • Integrates with previous knowledge | Concepts and activities are presented independent of one another, and students are not asked to apply previous learning. | The teacher sometimes links concepts and activities to one another and to previous learning. | The teacher consistently links concepts and activities to one another and to previous learning. | If the instruction is in English, and the child is in beginning level, the child is going to stay in the present tense and focus on concrete info. Not all cultures use this type of dialogue between adults and children. (e.g., Hmong, Latinos). |
| Connection to the Real World <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real-world applications • Related to students' lives | The teacher does not relate concepts to the students' actual lives. | The teacher makes some attempts to relate concepts to students' actual lives. | The teacher consistently relates concepts to the students' actual lives. | How would the teacher be able to do this if they did not speak the child's language and/or if they did not have knowledge about the cultural and social circumstances of the child and their family? If the observer did not speak the language of the child and their teacher, how would they know what is going on? |

