

Blueprint for a More Efficient NAEYC Program Accreditation System

Walter S. Gilliam

EDITOR'S NOTE: At the request of the Council for NAEYC Accreditation, the NAEYC Governing Board commissioned Walter S. Gilliam to conduct an independent review of the NAEYC Academy's accreditation system, focusing on the assessment process used to reach accreditation decisions. This article presents a summary of the report that NAEYC staff, the council, and the Board are using as the cornerstone of the criteria review process now under way. More information about the criteria review and ways to participate can be found at www.naeyc.org/academy/primary/feedbackstandards.

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ccreditation of programs for young children by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has been long recognized as a touchstone and nationally unifying voice for high-quality early childhood programs. No program and no system for accrediting programs can be perfect. Both should always be in a process of self-study aimed toward continuous improvement. To this end, NAEYC engaged this author to assemble a panel of nationally recognized experts in child development, assessment, child care, and early education to provide a detailed critique of the NAEYC

Accreditation criteria and procedures. The purpose was to generate recommendations for how the accreditation process can be improved. This is a summary of the impressions and recommendations of the panel. A copy of the full report is available on TORCH (www.naeyc.org/torch).

Four nationally recognized experts—Deborah J. Cassidy, John M. Love, Samuel J. Meisels, and Robert C. Pianta—reviewed six areas of the NAEYC Accreditation process; rated each area based on its scientific rigor, feasibility, clarity, and overall utility; and indicated what they feel to be the strengths, weaknesses, and

recommendations for each area. The six areas are (a) the accreditation protocols (including the criteria), (b) the measures used to rate the criteria, (c) the scoring of the measures, (d) the way classrooms and material searches are randomized at the program sites, (e) assessor selection and training, and (f) how assessor reliability is maintained.

Each reviewer received extensive materials detailing all of these areas, consisting of 17 documents that describe the full NAEYC Accreditation system. Reviewers were also asked to read and rate each of the 417 accreditation criteria (including emerging practice criteria), based on its level of scientific support, and give recommendations as to whether individual criteria should be kept, significantly revised, or eliminated. Each expert completed his or her review independently and blind to the comments of the other reviewers.

The reviewers noted several strengths

- The accreditation protocols and criteria, in general, are detailed, clear, and very thorough. The specific measures used in the process are well crafted and well organized, and the definitions and examples given for the measures are clear and helpful.
- Assessor requirements are provided in excellent detail; the overall amount of assessor training (including the use of video training) is good; and the use of assessor reliability checks on an annual and ongoing basis is excellent.
- Compensation for assessors is a “long overdue” improvement.

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- The process of selecting classrooms at the site level is valid and appropriate, and the procedures used to identify which groups to observe are clear and easy to follow.
- The review process for programs that failed to achieve accreditation is thorough and may reduce errors in accreditation decisions.

The reviewers also noted several challenges

- There are far too many criteria that are a part of the accreditation process. This was the most consistently stated and strongly expressed concern. Specific concerns were that (a) the number of criteria is far greater than what is needed to determine whether a program should be accredited or not; (b) there is much redundancy across criteria; and (c) this much data collection creates an unnecessary burden on both early childhood programs and NAEYC assessors and may decrease the reliability of the overall process.
- Content keys, which provide useful information for rating indicators, are very helpful on some of the measures, but are not found on several other measures used during the assessor visit.
- Dichotomous (Met/Not Met) scoring of criteria does not allow representa-

tion of the full range of variability. Given the large number of criteria currently employed, however, collecting additional data on each criterion may compound the already considerable data collection burden.

- There is considerable variability in detail between items on the measures, with some being highly detailed and others being more broad and vague.

- Some alternative scoring strategies may be difficult to understand and may upwardly bias results.

Recommendations

On the basis of these strengths and challenges, the reviewers offered several recommendations.

First, greatly reduce the overall number of criteria on which programs are expected to document their performance and the related number of items and data points being collected in the assessment process. This was clearly the foremost recommendation made. Although it is not clear exactly how many criteria should be retained, reviewers felt that the number should be far less than the current 417, and perhaps as few as 50. The full list of criteria may be retained as a comprehensive list of guiding principles or best practices, while a smaller subset of more easily measurable items would be used to collect the data necessary to make an accreditation determination. The reviewers offered various suggestions for reducing the number of criteria and items.

Second, consider further reducing the data collection burden by decreasing the sources of evidence used for

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items or developing methods for each criterion by which an assessor may use any specific evidence or some smaller combination of evidences. This could be achieved through statistical analysis of existing NAEYC Accreditation data to identify for each retained criterion which source of evidence is most predictive and whether the use of additional sources of evidence significantly adds to predictive validity. When multiple sources of evidence are required, there should be a clear rationale for this need.

Third, with a smaller number of criteria and resulting accreditation items, consider methods for collecting the retained items at a greater level of detail, rather than the current dichotomous scoring.

Fourth, consider further increasing the assessor stipends.

Fifth, consider providing regularly scheduled (perhaps annual) reports of the methods used to determine the reliability of assessors, the results of those reliability tests, the percentage of visits where a reliability check was performed, how reliability rates were calculated, and where the reliability checks occurred.

Although it would be naïve to assume that “cutting a few notes” would lead to perfection, in the case of NAEYC Accreditation of programs for young children, it is the perfect place to start.

By far the greatest challenge identified by the reviewers was the large number of criteria (and to a lesser degree, the several forms of evidence required for many criteria) on which the NAEYC Academy bases accreditation decisions. All other challenges the reviewers identified were dwarfed by this one in terms of how consistently and strongly the concern was raised. The main point of this concern is that the large amount of data collection in the current system is far beyond what is necessary to make an accreditation determination. It creates an unnecessary and potentially counterproductive burden for both programs and assessors—a burden that reviewers felt may potentially decrease both the reliability of data collection and the validity of the overall results.

Efforts toward strengthening the NAEYC Accreditation system should begin with significantly streamlining the amount of data necessary to make the accreditation determination—specifically, reducing the number of criteria and related measurement items used in the accreditation process. A reasonable plan of action would be to use existing NAEYC data from accreditation determinations in past years to determine which criteria (and sources of evidence within criteria) are most related to whether a program achieved accreditation versus was deferred or denied

accreditation. The full complement of criteria could be retained or revised to constitute a set of guiding principles for program quality and/or best practice. Once a smaller number of criteria and items have been identified, prior accreditation data could be used to determine the degree to which this smaller set of data replicates the results of collecting data across all of the current criteria.

There may be concern that a smaller subset of criteria would encourage programs to focus only on quality in a limited, circumscribed range. This could be addressed through creating various alternate/parallel subsets of criteria. Such alternate forms would allow NAEYC to randomly choose one of several forms for each accreditation determination. This would still greatly reduce the amount of data collection while also requiring programs to be prepared to demonstrate quality across the full range—but a full range of far fewer than 417 criteria.

When the specific criteria (as well as source[s] of evidence for each) to be retained have been determined, attention should shift to entertaining the other suggestions raised by the reviewers. In the process, it would be wise to consider further validating the revised system against other measures of classroom quality that have been found to be predictive of child outcomes or other desirable conditions, such as program stability and low teacher turnover.

Accreditation by NAEYC is an indicator of high quality for many early childhood programs, and there are many assets in the current system. Making a good program better through continuous quality improvement and recognizing quality are the goals of accreditation. The path forward is to capitalize on the many strengths of the current accreditation system while moving toward greater efficiency. Providing excellent care and education to young children and services to their families requires much hard work, but when it is done well, it looks both simple and elegant. The same holds true for promoting and recognizing quality.

The path toward simplicity

“Your work is ingenious. It’s quality work. And there are simply too many notes, that’s all. Just cut a few, and it will be perfect.”

—Emperor Joseph II to Mozart in the 1984 movie *Amadeus*

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