

**TAKING STOCK:  
A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF  
EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN THE USVI**

***Submitted by:***

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

***Project Purpose***

The purpose of this research was to begin to survey the landscape of early care and education (ECE) settings in the USVI with the hopes of informing interventions to strengthen the overall quality of the sector. Specifically, characteristics of programs, including their quality, were assessed as were perceived needs to improve the quality of services they deliver. Directors were also probed for their feedback concerning publicly-funded strategies currently being used in the U. S. to improve the quality of community-based ECE programs. Additionally, we attempted to identify common barriers that USVI children experience that prevent them from entering school poised for success.

***Study Method***

Quality in twenty-two classrooms from 17 pre-selected early care and education (ECE) programs serving preschoolers on St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John was observed. Programs were selected to reflect geographical diversity and the varied types of settings on the three islands. Quality was assessed using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2006), a measure widely used in the U.S. for both research and quality rating and improvement initiatives.

Additional data concerning program characteristics and perceived needs were collected through interviews with directors and teachers. Other information about the sector that helped contextualize study findings was gathered from interviews with other early childhood stakeholders, participation in Department of Human Services (DHS) meetings to update licensing standards, attendance at the *Best Beginnings* conference, and from informal visits to other programs.

## *Results*

### **Characteristics of Programs<sup>1</sup>**

All programs observed reported having a mission, which was nearly equally split between one described as promoting the development and/or school readiness of young children and one described as following a Christian philosophy. Over half of the programs used a curriculum to plan activities, with these curriculum choices reflecting the program's mission. Language and literacy activities were the most commonly reported daily program activities, which was followed by outdoor playtime. Less than a fifth of programs reported offering time for free play on a daily basis. Daily activities were often supplemented by activities occurring on a weekly basis, such as computer time, art and/or music activities, or physical education. Among directors, the most common thing they hoped children would learn from being in their program was related to behavioral or socio-emotional outcomes, such as being respectful or developing positive self-esteem. Among teachers, the most common response to the same question was equally split between cognitive-academic and socio-emotional outcomes.

The financial situation of most programs is very difficult at best. More than half of programs can not make ends meet by the end of the month, and of those that can, it is because costs of operating the program are being offset by other things such as ownership of the building, free help, or fees paid by children in higher grades. The difficult financial situation of most programs is in part the result of problems with regulations governing child care subsidies made available to low-income working families through the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant. Because of regulations specific to the USVI, programs accepting families paying with these subsidies can only charge private-pay families the rate accepted for subsidy reimbursements, which is only approximately \$300 per month for the full-time care of a preschooler. Most programs that do not accept subsidies are also affected because they cannot charge more and remain competitive with other programs. In comparison, programs in the U.S. charge up to an average of \$11,678 per year for the equivalent amount of child care. Even if such regulations were changed, however, it does not mean that programs could raise their fees as the average per capita income of families with children living in the USVI is less than that of any of the 50 states. This is further compounded by an extremely high cost of living.

In terms of staff qualifications, although just over half of directors had a Bachelor's degree or higher, only about a third of them had any education or experience in early childhood education. Teacher qualifications varied widely, with just over a quarter of them having an Associates degree or higher, to a couple of teachers that did not even have a high school degree. Nearly a third of teachers interviewed said they were currently enrolled in school and working towards a degree. All directors expressed the wish to hire more qualified staff but said they could not because of the salaries they are able to offer them. In more than half of the programs observed, the starting salary for a full-time teacher was less than \$15,000 per year and did not include benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> The data presented in this section pertain to non-Head Start programs.

Meeting the ongoing professional development needs of staff is done through workshops offered by DHS or the annual *Best Beginnings* conference, which all expressed was an invaluable resource. Especially important is that the conference is structured in a way that allows most of the ECE community in the USVI to participate. Interestingly, the University of the Virgin Islands, which has what appears to be an innovative ECE program, was rarely mentioned as a professional development resource.

### **Quality of Programs Observed**

Each item on the ECERS-R is scored from 1 to 7 and there are specific indicators of practices that meet inadequate, minimal, good, and high standards of quality anchored at points 1, 3, 5, and 7, respectively, for each item. Total scores and subscale scores are averaged across relevant times and thus, can range from 1 to 7 and also be described as meeting inadequate, minimally adequate, or good quality standards as specified by the ECERS-R.

In terms of overall quality as defined by the ECERS-R, 75% of classrooms scored in the inadequate range of quality and the remainder scored in the minimally adequate range of quality. Average total scores ranged from 1.29 to 3.55.

Inspection of the subscale scores and items reveals why programs scored low overall, and also areas in which they are doing better.

- Approximately two-thirds of classrooms had Space and Furnishings subscale scores that met the standards for minimal levels of quality, although the vast majority did not have adequate space or furnishings for outdoor play.
- All classrooms had Personal Care Routines subscale scores in the inadequate range of quality, most often due to a lack of sufficient hand-washing, bug sprays left within the reach of the children, and infrequent toilet flushing. The latter two practices are understandable given the environmental context but their risks in a group care context may need to be considered more carefully.
- More than half of the classrooms had scores in the minimal range for the subscale related to promoting Language-Reasoning, with the majority offering at least one staff-initiated language activity daily. However, many classrooms were lacking in books, and adult-child conversations typically did not encourage children's communication and thus, promote their language development.
- In terms of the Activities subscale, which assesses the breadth and quality of activities offered to children daily, the large majority of classrooms (86%) scored in the inadequate range. The majority of classrooms simply did not provide access to certain types of activities on a daily basis, such as music or sand/water play, and daily art or block play was available in only about half of the classrooms. Most classrooms were lacking sufficient resources for the activities they did offer.
- Over half of the scores for the Interactions subscale, which assesses the quality of interactions between staff and children, were in the good range of quality indicating that interactions between teachers and children were warm and supportive. By ECERS-R standards, however, the majority of teachers were not

- considered sufficiently or appropriately affectionate. Moreover, item scores related to supervision and discipline tended to be the lowest. In a number of classrooms, we observed children left unattended in bathrooms or allowed to leave the classroom independently. Most discipline observed was non-punitive, however, teachers did not know how to effectively use non-punitive methods of discipline. In a couple of classrooms, we witnessed what might be considered emotionally damaging interactions.
- Most classrooms scored in the inadequate range of quality for the Program Structure subscale as a result of not offering any time for free play, keeping children in large groups for most of the day, and poorly managed transitions.
  - In terms of provisions for staff, including access to adult-sized toilets and furniture, and space to keep their belongings, almost half of the classrooms scored in the good range of quality. However, in over a quarter of the classrooms observed, teachers did not receive a single break during the day, and in a third of programs there was no separate administrative office space.

### **Summary**

Although the sample was very limited, the regularity with which certain things were observed allows some tentative conclusions to be drawn about the state of early care and education for preschoolers in the USVI. These include the following:

- children's basic health and safety needs are not being met adequately,
- most children do not have the opportunity to engage in a variety of activities which promote their development across all domains,
- most programs do not have adequate materials to support stimulating and developmentally appropriate learning activities inside the classroom,
- most programs lack safe outdoor equipment,
- most children spend too much time in whole group activities and have much too few opportunities for free play or self-directed learning, and,
- although most interactions between the children and teachers are positive, the environment in many programs is stressful because of developmentally inappropriate environments and expectations for children's behavior.

### **Use of the ECERS-R in the USVI**

The fact that the experienced observers found it relatively easy to complete the ECERS-R and that the psychometric properties of the ECERS-R in this sample were good suggests that it could be a useful instrument for quality improvement activities in the USVI. However, some items may need to be redefined because of cultural differences, such as how affection is typically expressed, or environmental differences, such as infrequent toilet flushing to conserve water. Items related to commonly observed activities that are not included on the ECERS-R, such as religious education and/or prayer, might also need to be developed. Further research is also necessary to determine whether classroom ECERS-R scores predict children's outcomes.

## **Perceived Barriers and Needs**

Just about half of the directors identified their teachers' professional development needs as related to developing more knowledge and skills related to developmentally appropriate practices as a major area of need. A fifth of the directors mentioned the need for staff training related to classroom management and discipline, and nearly an equal amount mentioned training related to working with parents. About a third of directors identified their own needs as related to administration or management, and a third mentioned the need to learn more about early childhood education.

In terms of barriers to providing the highest quality program possible, those most commonly mentioned by directors included a lack of supplies, material and equipment, and a general lack of financial resources. Directors also mentioned the lack of professional development opportunities for staff. Not surprisingly, when asked what they needed, the most common responses concerned materials and supplies, in addition to money to pay for qualified staff. For teachers, the most frequent challenge they reported related to behavioral or discipline issues in the classroom, followed closely by a lack of parental involvement or support of their children's early education. Teachers identified trainings as the resource they would find most helpful.

Directors had generally favorable reactions to strategies used to improve the quality of ECE in the U.S. These include providing scholarships to teachers to earn college degrees and financial resources to reward these teachers for completing courses, and providing on-site technical assistance to teachers. Most directors were favorable to the idea of implementing a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) in the USVI, assuming it provides adequate resources for program improvement and to reward programs for meeting higher standards. Finally, reactions to the idea of greater investments in the Head Start programs met with more mixed feedback, principally because many directors believed that parents want other types of options available to them.

## **Perspectives on the School Readiness of USVI Children**

Directors' most common answers regarding what they believe children need in order to enter kindergarten ready for success included basic academic needs and knowledge, as well as positive socio-emotional and behavioral skills. Nearly a quarter of directors also emphasized that children need to develop positive attitudes about learning.

In terms of barriers to school readiness, by far the most common responses had to do with inadequacies in the home environment, including a lack of stimulating experiences and appropriate discipline, and exposure to inappropriate experiences. Over a quarter of responses had to do with problems with the school context, including the late birthday cut-off for school entry.

When asked what was needed to remove these barriers, the most common responses offered had to do with educating parents, from how to read to their children or to best discipline their children. Much less common were responses related to improving the

quality of early learning experiences. However, when specifically asked how the Department of Human Services (DHS) should spend its resources to promote school readiness, the most common response (41%) was related to more resources for teachers, including professional development and funds to pay higher salaries and/or benefits. The next most common response for how to spend DHS resources was to invest resources in parent education.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Because of the limits of the sample selected and its size, more research is necessary before a truly comprehensive picture of the landscape of early care and education settings in the USVI is developed. However, based on this research, several preliminary conclusions can be drawn about the nature of these settings and the context in which they operate.

The average quality of ECE settings in the USVI is not sufficient to promote children's school success. This fact should not be surprising given that larger context in which these programs operate actively works against quality. The vast majority of programs simply cannot generate the revenue needed to pay salaries to qualified teachers and/or to buy sufficient materials and equipment. There is also no coordinated professional development system to support the preparation and continuing education of teachers.

There are assets in the community that are available to support a quality improvement effort. Most importantly, directors as a whole were motivated to learn how to provide better services for children and families. In addition, other things in the community which would support efforts to improve quality include the fact that all early care and education settings are licensed by one government body which is viewed favorably in the community (i.e. DHS), the increasing political support in the USVI for investing in early childhood, receptivity among directors to participate in a QRIS, and the accessibility and quality of the *Best Beginnings* conference. Finally, as part of our study, we met many individuals in the ECE community with expertise that has yet to be tapped.

There are a number of barriers present in the community that will also challenge a quality improvement effort. These include the current subsidy regulations, unstable enrollment patterns in ECE programs, outdated licensing regulations, a lack of knowledge in the community and among parents about what constitutes quality and why and how such early learning experiences are important to children's development, the lack of the university's involvement in ECE issues, the lack of a strong advocacy organization comprised of early childhood educators, the lack of communication between government bodies that serve young children, that each island has its unique issues, and that children experience multiple risk factors that challenge even the best early learning programs to meet their needs.

## ***Recommendations***

Despite the challenges present, the USVI appears ready for a system-wide initiative to improve the quality of young children's early care and learning experiences and opportunities for school success. Our recommendations target activities in three areas, which need to be effectively coordinated if substantial and sustainable improvements in the early childhood sector are going to be made. Within each area, we also offer more specific suggestions.

### **I. Change Public Policies That Work Against Quality and School Success**

- Change the regulations related to restrictions to what programs can charge private pay parents when they also receive subsidies.
- Update child care regulations to be consistent with current practices in the U.S.
- Change the birthday cut-off for entry into kindergarten to September 1<sup>st</sup>.

### **II. Implement a Quality Rating and Improvement System for Licensed ECE Programs**

- Make the process of designing and implementing a QRIS inclusive of all stakeholders, including the providers themselves.
- Related to the above point above, help ECE providers establish a professional organization that addresses their needs.
- Phase-in a quality rating and improvement system for providers as new child care regulations are rolled out.
- Study the Environment Rating Scales further to assure their usefulness and validity in the USVI.
- Support the continued success and future growth of the *Best Beginnings* conference and engage the University in developing a coordinated professional development system for ECE teachers.
- Establish a low-interest loan program or capital grants program for ECE programs
- Ground quality improvement efforts in data that both inform specific strategies and evaluate their effectiveness.

### **III. Educate Parents and the Community about the Importance of the Early Childhood Years**

- Run a public education campaign to inform parents and the public about the importance of early care and education for brain development and future success.
- Assist parents to become partners with their child's teachers and enlist them as partners in advocacy efforts.
- Increase investments in community resources, such as safe playgrounds and museums, which support the development of young children.

In conclusion, completing this study left us with a genuine sense of optimism about what can be accomplished in the USVI. The challenge in the USVI was described to us as



“huggable” and indeed it is much smaller in scale than that faced by states that have managed to make major improvements in the quality of their early care and education systems. Moreover, the openness to change expressed by many of the directors and teachers we visited, demonstrates their commitment to providing the best they can for young children and their families. Now they need to be provided with the support, tools, and resources to do so.