

NAEYC's Reinvented Accreditation System,
from the perspective of a Validator turned Local Assessor
by Dottie Bauer, Ed.D.

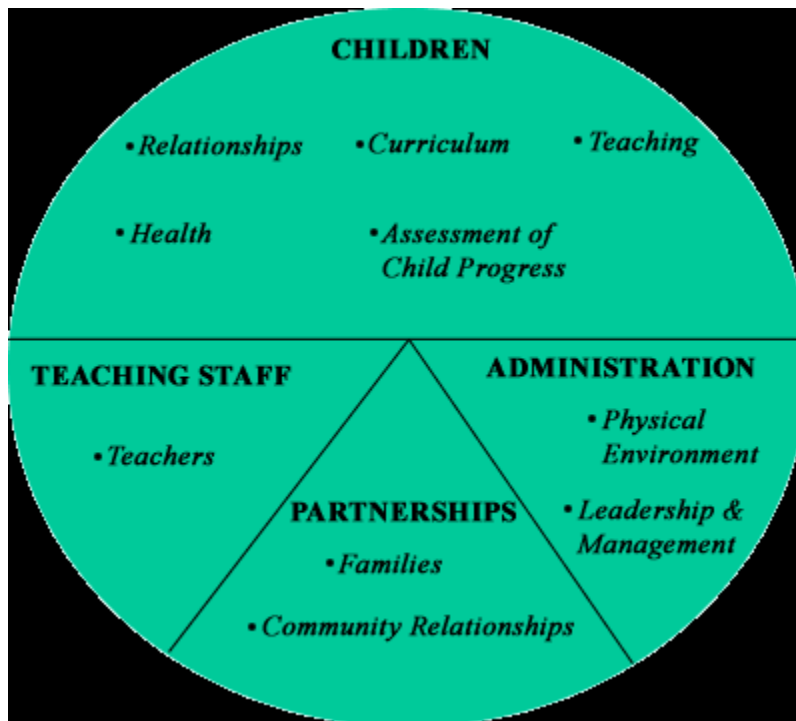
Introduction

In the summer of 1986 I attended my first training to become a Validator with the NAEYC National Academy for the Accreditation of Early Childhood Programs system. Voluntary accreditation was new to our profession then, but since that time efforts to support quality early childhood programs have expanded, and NAEYC Accreditation is nationally recognized. There are more than 10,000 accredited programs in the country, with 57 in New Hampshire. Now, after more than 20 years in operation, the accreditation system sponsored by NAEYC has been re-invented, strengthened, and made more consistent through the use of more rigorous self-study and assessment procedures.

I recently returned from training to become a Local Assessor for the new system. There were 80 early childhood professionals from across the country – 40 Local and 40 Regional Assessors – and many NAEYC staffers working together in the new NAEYC Headquarters on L Street in Washington, DC. During the training I learned more about the goals of the new accreditation system and the science behind some of the changes that have been made. This article will share some of what I learned. For more information, read the NAEYC publications focused on accreditation¹ and visit the website (www.naeyc.org) to discover resources and materials that will guide you in planning for accreditation, as well as expand your knowledge of our field.

Standards and steps in the process

The re-invented accreditation system is based on 10 standards, five focused on children and five focused on the areas of teaching staff, administration, physical environment, and partnerships. The diagram below² illustrates the foundational standards and the standards focused on children.



Each standard is further defined by topic areas, or “big ideas,” as well as specific criteria. While the list of 400+ criteria may seem daunting, a close review indicates that this expanded list has: (1) clarified and made more specific the standards for quality we have used for years in the previous system; and (2) updated the criteria to reflect new research in areas such as infant development, English language learning, and the impact of culture on quality early care and education.

Programs will not be assessed on ALL criteria during the visit, but rather on a random sample of criteria; a minimum of 80% of the standards assessed must be met. Programs are not expected to achieve 100% compliance with the criteria in order to become accredited. However, there are some required criteria that must be met, and others that are always assessed. The new 4-step process provides ample support for each program to engage in self study and improvement (step 1) prior to applying for (step 2) and submitting candidacy materials (step 3) to the Academy. The final step (step 4) is the accreditation decision. Programs will now prepare Classroom and Program Portfolios, which contain documentation related to the standards and criteria for each classroom and for the entire program. Other areas of improvement in the system include more rigorous review to provide feedback to the program prior to scheduling an on-site visit, and more specific timelines to enhance the responsiveness of the Academy to program requests.

Role of assessors

The Academy will continue to send reviewers to visit each program that has completed the first three steps of the process, but the recruitment and preparation of these reviewers has been improved. In the past all of these reviewers, called Validators, were volunteers. NAEYC had no clear way to evaluate the consistence and reliability of a Validator’s response to a program visit, resulting in inconsistent accreditation decisions. As part of the reinvention process, NAEYC contracted with UCLA to develop measures of reliability that are now being applied to the on-site assessment process. The goal of these measures is to achieve a consistent evaluation from the reviewers, now called Assessors, regardless of who they are or where your program is located.

The Assessor core will now include two types of personnel, Local and Regional Assessors. Regional Assessors are hired by NAEYC to work in different areas of the country, travel to programs, and complete 6 to 8 on-site visits per month (72 to 96 visits per year). They receive extensive training, submit their results for audit and review by Academy staff, and are responsible for scheduling, conducting the classroom observation and classroom portfolio review during the visit, and for submitting the results of the review to the Academy. If a Regional Assessor is the only person assigned, she/he will complete all the tasks associated with the visit. Regional Assessors will be more experienced with the process due to the number of visits conducted, have a contractual relationship with NAEYC, and oversee the more “subjective” portions of the visit (i.e. classroom observation). These changes are intended to increase the reliability and accuracy of the on-site assessment visit, to ensure that accreditation decisions are made fairly and based on consistent information from the field.

Local Assessors will provide support to the Regional Assessors when a program visit requires two or more people. Local Assessors are also trained and reviewed by NAEYC, but only have responsibility for assessing the administrative documentation (i.e. program portfolios, staff and child files, facilities). Local Assessors agree to conduct 3 to 6 visits per year and are not employees of NAEYC. Thus the Local Assessor will play a more “behind-the-scenes” role during a visit, working with the foundational standards and criteria as opposed to those directly related to children’s experiences in the classroom. As a newly trained Local Assessor I will work

with Regional Assessors to complete visits, be reviewed by NAEYC, complete conflict of interest forms, and attend additional training every two years in order to continue in the role.

Tips for preparing for the Assessor's visit

While NAEYC does provide programs with latitude in organizing their program and classroom portfolios, it will assist the Assessors if you organize the documentation by standards. The Assessor has a limited amount of time for each task and must document to NAEYC how much time is spent on each portion of the visit. Don't make the Assessor hunt around to find documents or guess what you mean. It will help if you clearly sequence the portfolio documentation by standard and criteria, label each item, and include explanation of how the item included for documentation shows that your program meets the specific criteria. Because Assessors are only reviewing a portion of the entire list of criteria, include your documentation under each criteria, even if it is the same material as included in a different section. For example, include the relevant section(s) of your Parent Handbook under each criteria related to that material. This will allow the Assessor to easily assess the criteria, rather than miss a document because it is included in a different section of the portfolio. While this may sound restrictive, it will actually enable program administrators and classroom teachers to be confident that they have provided the necessary documentation for the visit. As always, be ready to provide access to staff and child files and to gather additional documents (i.e. from the classroom or a central office) as needed.

Summary

While many of the details of the National Academy Early Childhood Program Accreditation System have changed, the intent is still the same. "Ensuring the quality of children's daily experiences in early childhood programs and promoting positive child outcomes is the heart"³ of the new system, its standards, criteria, and procedures. The scientific analysis of random selection and the 80% compliance rate is based on the statistical knowledge that if a program meets 80% of the criteria selected (from the 400+ criteria that exist) the experiences for the children are positive ones. If the Assessor is consistent in evaluating the documentation, the accreditation decisions will be soundly and fairly made. These changes will help us continue to know that an early childhood program that is NAEYC accredited does indeed indicate high quality.

Dottie is a professor in the Early Childhood program at Keene State College and holds the NH Trainer, Mentor, Faculty, Level IV credential. She was a preschool teacher for 16 years before moving into the college classroom, and can be contacted at dbauer@keene.edu.

¹ A good place to start is with the *NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria*, published in 2005. This book describes the accreditation process and explains the standards and criteria.

² Diagram retrieved from http://www.naeyc.org/academy/web_ready/IntroNewCriteria.asp.

³ *NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria*, 2005, p. 7.