

50 Word Count:

In *The Reality Classroom*, childcare provider training is broadcast live via video conference from a childcare center classroom to county extension sites, increasing provider access to improve the learning environment and the number of literacy activities in the classroom.

30 Word Count

In *The Reality Classroom*, childcare providers view ways to improve the classroom learning environment after interactive participation with training broadcast live from the childcare center.

Program Description- situation, emphasis, goals,

The key to quality childcare is a well-trained provider. Of the 7,432 providers in Mississippi, less than 3% are employed in a nationally accredited childcare center, compared to 10% in other states. Research shows that children's literacy development is supported in classrooms that have play and learning centers that include a large number and a wide variety of books, writing tools and other materials and props conducive to dramatic play (Neuman and Dickinson, 2001). The effect caregivers have on children clearly shows that the caregivers' education, training, and ability to provide a safe and stimulating environment has an impact on children's cognitive and emotional development. (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Because there are only 40 accredited centers in the state, most providers have never seen or worked in a childcare center that meets quality performance standards. To increase provider response to improve the learning environment and increase the number of language and literacy activities in their classroom, it was the goal of the *Reality Classroom* sessions 1.) to show how an early childhood classroom exceeds minimal licensure standards 2.) to adequately meet national performance standards 3.) to show set-up and maintenance with age-appropriate activities. With traditional training, this would only be feasible using slides or pictures. With distance education, it was possible to take the interactive video equipment to the accredited centers and broadcast while children were actively engaged in their learning centers. Providers participating from county extension offices could interact with the training agent and the classroom teacher in the learning process.

Program Design and Format

In a series of five sessions emphasizing the learning environment, access to accredited classrooms through video-conferencing virtually opened the doors to quality care experiences to providers throughout the state.

Aiken Village Pre-School and Starkville United Methodist Church, both nationally accredited childcare centers, partnered with the agents to develop programs that promote national performance standards using the Infant/Toddler Rating Scale (ITERS) and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS). The FCS agent planned the training with the accredited childcare center directors and teachers, and with the Extension Distance Education Coordinator. Parents gave written consent for their children to be photographed or video recorded for educational satellite training. The teachers and professionals mentored age-appropriate teaching strategies and routines with children in the classroom, as the providers watched, then responded to questions from providers at the various county extension sites.

Quarterly calendars listing video conference training topics and dates were mailed to licensed centers. Pre-registration for sessions was required, but there was no fee charged to attend sessions. Providers contacted their county extension office to request training. If the local office was unable to host training, training was coordinated with the nearest county extension office. The Childcare Resource and Referral Center emailed hand-outs for the sessions to the county extension sites hosting the trainings. County extension staff facilitated at local sites. The two hour training topics included:

The Learning Environment for Three Year Old Children, Thematic Units for Pre-School, Creating Environments for Infants and Toddlers, The Learning Environment for Four Year Old Children and, The Learning Environment: Outdoor Spaces.

Concerns and Issues

The program targets childcare providers living in both urban and rural areas that attend in the early evening from 6:15-8:15 p.m. The accredited childcare centers used in the sessions have an extended day program until 8:00 p.m. Instructional strategies to effectively involve a large remote audience with a

range of educational and work experience were needed. Attendance averaged more than 250 participants per session. Since the programs were interactive video, participants could not only view the program but also interact with the educators and other participants across the state. The participants could ask questions and share ideas that benefited all of the childcare providers in attendance. Working with the Distance Education coordinator, the sessions were planned with visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners in mind. Strategies included:

- Power point presentations with minimal text that emphasize objectives and include pictures, charts or graphics
- Interviews with classroom teachers explaining their center management plan and general classroom set-up
- Focus on children actively engaged in play with age-appropriate activities in learning centers
- Utilize the document camera to enhance a close-up view for age-appropriate books, toys, and classroom displays
- Plan two group activities per session that allow for providers to respond at remote sites
- Hand-outs that reinforce the performance standards being shown in the session

Resources Involved

- Laura Beth Hebbler, Early Childhood Coordinator, Mississippi State Department of Education, supplied additional copies of Mississippi's Pre-Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines* for training purposes. Copies were printed and distributed at Childcare Resource and Referral Centers and also posted in PDF format online at mde.k12.us.ms.edu.
- Aiken Village Preschool Director, Carol Jones, and teaching staff provided the age-appropriate preschool learning environment and modeled interaction with the children.
- First United Methodist Church Director, Susan Smith, and teaching staff provided the infant and toddler learning environments and modeled routines and interactions with infants and toddlers

- The Mississippi Childcare Quality Step System, pilot-project, Department of Human Resources, promoted trainings on their website ([www. qualitystep. mssstate.edu](http://www.qualitystep.mssstate.edu))

Accomplishments

A post workshop survey was distributed to 142 childcare providers six months after completion of five *Reality Classroom* trainings. Not everyone participated in all five trainings, but had attended at least one previous session. As a result of the on-site training with interactive sessions:

- 87% of participants added or changed a learning center in their classroom that improved the play and interaction of the children
- 73% of participants made block play available on a daily basis, or added blocks and/or accessories to the block center
- 73% of participants made changes to the cozy area of the room to include a variety of books, soft furnishings, or additional language materials such as flannel boards
- 51% of participants created a writing center and/or added materials such as a variety of papers, writing tools or printed words to the writing center

One center with a staff of ten serving more than fifty children realized none of their classrooms had learning centers for pre-school children or interest centers for infants and toddlers. After participating in two sessions, the director and staff stopped placing toys on tables and stopped using toy boxes. They labeled the classroom, created five learning centers in the preschool rooms, and two interest areas in the infant room. Previously, few toys or books were accessible to children. After making changes, staff responded they had fewer children crying and more children playing together. The director of the center responded that being able to participate in the videoconferences of an accredited classroom while children were playing, helped her staff to understand how they could develop learning centers in their own classrooms.

Economic impact is valued at approximately \$121,600: calculated at \$95.00 per provider with 1280 total providers participating. This is based on free curriculum * provided with training (\$75.00), value of training [Figure 1]: as compared to fees charged in online childcare courses (\$10.00 per contact

hour), and the estimate of time saved in travel attending training at the county extension site (\$10.00).

Time saved in travel ranged from ten minutes to four hours. Childcare directors pay their providers hourly wages to attend training. When providers can travel an hour less to training, it saves cost of an hourly wage in the center for each provider attending. The average travel time saved was one hour.

Value of Training [Fig.1]

Session	Participants	Contact Hours	Total Value (\$10.00 per hour)
<i>The Learning Environment: Three Year Olds</i>	184	2.0	\$3680.00
<i>Thematic Units for Pre-School Children</i>	243	2.0	\$4860.00
<i>The Learning Environment:4 year olds</i>	294	2.0	\$5880.00
<i>Creating Environments for Infants and Toddlers</i>	265	2.0	\$5300.00
<i>The Learning Environment: Outdoor Spaces</i>	294	2.0	\$5880.00

Future Implications

With the inclusion of the Mississippi Department of Human Services’ pilot project implementing a Quality Rating System for childcare centers in Mississippi, fifty-eight centers are currently enrolled in the project and will complete two annual monitoring visits that assess the learning environment based on national standards. For the next five years, all providers enrolled in the project must complete 22 hours of training which includes age-specific training in the classroom learning environment, creating a target audience that can benefit from the technology utilized in the video conference trainings. As the training and qualifications of providers improves, gains in language development of young children and school readiness are likely to improve. Based on feedback from the Reality Classroom trainings, providers have requested more training focusing on age-specific activities to be used in learning centers.