
Issue Editors' Notes

IMPROVING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT and well-being requires improving the everyday settings where development occurs. In this volume, we asked scholars who study three different settings—classrooms, youth programs, and mentoring dyads—to reflect on what constitutes quality in their setting and how to think about measuring it. We urged these authors to focus specifically on quality “at the point of service,” meaning the specific practices, processes, and interactions that occur among adults and youth in the setting. We also asked them to offer advice to practitioners about effective and manageable ways to incorporate assessment into their work in order to improve quality.

Two articles focus on better understanding and measuring what occurs between teachers and students in classrooms. Brian Rowan, Robin Jacob, and Richard Correnti emphasize the importance of the content of instruction and what can be learned from teacher logs, while Robert C. Pianta and Bridget K. Hamre focus on the nature of teacher-student interactions, describing an observational measure and its role in anchoring teacher professional development.

Nancy L. Deutsch and Renée Spencer discuss the components of high-quality mentoring relationships and the utility of using different techniques such as interview, survey, and observation to assess the quality of mentoring.

Focusing on youth program settings, Reed W. Larson, Aimee N. Rickman, Colleen M. Gibbons, and Kathrin C. Walker describe the advantages of using qualitative research methods to understand practitioner expertise, or how staff respond to specific events, people, and dilemmas on the job. Jean Baldwin Grossman, Julie Goldsmith, Jessica Sheldon, and Amy J. A. Arbreton reflect on lessons learned from their work evaluating after-school programs and

argue that certain measurement approaches are more useful for understanding different dimensions of quality, such as environment, content, and engagement. Charles Smith, Thomas J. Devaney, Tom Akiva, and Samantha A. Sugar describe quality accountability systems that are anchored by observational assessment and discuss trade-offs in collecting data through self-assessment and external approaches. In the closing article, we, the issue editors, reflect on promising recent developments and identify future opportunities related to assessing and improving point-of-service quality in the out-of-school-time field.

As a whole, this set of articles offers answers to important questions about what matters at the point of service and how to measure what matters. At the same time, it raises a host of interesting questions and opportunities for further dialogue, innovation, and research. What follows are three questions that we as editors brought to this project, along with initial answers that draw on the contributions of various authors:

- *Can we define quality in a way that is universal?* In a general sense, yes. All of the article authors define quality in similar ways, and this collection reinforces the notion that positive development settings—be they classrooms, youth programs, or mentoring dyads—share key characteristics such as supportive relationships and activities aligned with explicit goals that actively engage youth. At the same time, the indicators of these general characteristics vary across particular goals, youth, and situations. Indeed Larson and colleagues' focus on practitioner expertise suggests that a universal marker of high quality may be the adult's ability to adjust to the needs of particular youth or situations.
- *How is point-of-service quality best measured?* Observation may be the gold standard, but it has important limitations. All of the articles in the volume argue that what adults in these settings do with young people is a critical, if not the critical, driver of quality. Given the central role that interactions play in determining quality and the limits we all have in reporting accurately on our interactions, the authors concur that directly observing what goes on

at the point of service can be extremely valuable for both assessment and improvement purposes. At the same time, some authors point to limitations of observation such as cost and intrusiveness (particularly for assessing mentoring of individual youth) and discuss the relative merits of logs, diaries, interviews, and surveys.

- *What should youth-serving settings be held accountable for?* These articles make a powerful case for measuring not only youth outcomes but also the specific inputs, processes, and practices that constitute the pathways to those outcomes. Given growing consensus in the field about what constitutes quality and the availability of promising point-of-service measures, this is now practical to do. However, assigning high stakes to assessment can compromise the usefulness of the information and discourage authentic reflection. Several authors advise that lower-stakes policy approaches that incentivize participation in quality improvement activities should be a priority.

This volume represents a wealth of knowledge about what is important to measure in youth-serving settings and the pros and cons of different approaches to measurement. We hope it helps practitioners and policymakers grapple with how to use scarce evaluation resources wisely, establish productive accountability systems, and link data and program improvement strategies in ways that make services more effective.

Nicole Yohalem
Robert C. Granger
Karen J. Pittman
Editors

NICOLE YOHALEM *is program director at the Forum for Youth Investment.*

ROBERT C. GRANGER *is president of the William T. Grant Foundation.*

KAREN J. PITTMAN *is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment.*