Enhancing Preschool Quality: A Survey of CLASS Training Effectiveness in Hawai‘i

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Abstract

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a research-based observational tool widely used to assess teacher–child interactions and enhance program quality in early childhood education (ECE). Over the past several decades, CLASS has been shown to support teacher effectiveness by promoting children’s social and academic development through high-quality interactions. Through the Preschool Development Grant Birth–Five (PDG B–5), Hawai‘i piloted the implementation of CLASS as a statewide program quality assessment tool for preschool settings. Implementation occurred in two phases: Phase I established baseline observations, while Phase II emphasized coaching, training, and professional support. This study presents findings from the CLASS Phase II Survey, conducted in Hawai‘i between December 2024 and January 2025. Phase II activities included pre- and post-observations, debrief meetings, domain-specific workshops across the three CLASS domains, and optional individualized support sessions for ECE teachers, assistants, and administrators from five preschools. The survey examined participants’ perceptions of the training’s effectiveness, level of support, and impact on teaching practices. Findings show that participants were primarily motivated by professional growth and program requirements, and demonstrate increases in knowledge, confidence, and intentionality across all CLASS domains. Qualitative responses highlighted the value of practical strategies, individualized feedback, and reflective debriefing sessions. Finally, the study’s implications support the CLASS Phase II training and recommend its continued implementation with targeted, domain-specific support to ECE teachers and administrators.

Keywords: early childhood education, teaching, professional development, program quality, pre-K

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Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) provides essential support to young children from birth to age five, laying the foundation for development before formal schooling. ECE includes childcare and instruction by qualified individuals other than the child's parents or caregivers (Morrissey, 2019). These services can take various forms, and occur in diverse settings such as preschools, home-based care, childcare centers, and faith-based programs and are delivered by public and private providers. ECE is an essential service for working families, yet public understanding and engagement with it can shift in social and historical contexts. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role ECE professionals play in supporting both families and the economy (Tait et al., 2023).

Access to high-quality ECE is essential for the well-being of children, families, and communities and has increasingly gained attention among policymakers and service providers. In addition, research has consistently shown that high-quality ECE is associated with gains in child's cognitive functioning, language development, social competence, and emotional regulation (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2002; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Studies emphasize the quality of interactions children experience in ECE settings, suggesting that teacher–student interactions play a more direct role in shaping developmental outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008). High quality ECE was also found to mitigate the effects of poverty on children's early development (McCartney et al., 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

While Hawai‘i has made progress in ECE, such as passing Act 46 in 2020 to establish the Ready Keiki Initiative with the goal of universal preschool access by 2032, several gaps remain (National Institute for Early Education Research Hawaii, 2024; Ready Keiki, 2023). According to the Kids Count Databook, only 47% of Hawai‘i's three- and four-year-olds participated in an ECE program (Hawai‘i Children's Action Network, 2022). Many families, particularly those from Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities, face systemic barriers related to access, affordability, and the quality of ECE services (DeBaryshem et al., 2024). To tackle these issues, a mixed-delivery system has emerged for collaboration among federal, state, private, and community-based providers. At the policy level, recent legislative efforts have emphasized partnerships with local communities to strengthen the ECE workforce, improve program quality, and expand access, particularly for infants and toddlers, public preschool initiatives, and early childhood programs, including those that integrate ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i and Native Hawaiian culture.

As the External Evaluator for the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Renewal Grant (PDG B-5), a 3-year initiative that aims to improve ECE systems, we have developed and implemented the Program Performance Evaluation Plan to assess the progress of the PDG B-5 funded activities in Hawai‘i. The project's multiple activities aim to provide improved access to ECE programs, services and resources. As the external evaluator of PDG B-5, the purpose is to: (1) Monitor and assess progress; (2) Measure effectiveness; and (3) Support continuous quality improvement through cross-sector collaboration.

As part of PDG B-5, Hawai‘i piloted the implementation of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) in ECE as a statewide, optional program quality assessment tool for preschool settings. This study presents findings from the CLASS Phase II Survey, conducted in Hawai‘i between December 2024 and January 2025.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a research-based observational tool designed to assess and enhance ECE program quality. CLASS systematically measures the emotional climate of classrooms and the quality of developmentally appropriate instructional practices (Perlman et al., 2016). The growing significance of this tool is reflected in its widespread adoption within statewide ECE quality assurance systems across the United States (National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement, 2013), where results are often used to inform high-stakes funding and decisions on quality improvement.

Over the past several decades, CLASS has been used to evaluate teacher–student interactions and overall classroom quality in prekindergarten settings (Head Start, 2023; Hongli et al., 2019). By emphasizing the quality of interactions, CLASS plays a critical role in supporting teacher effectiveness and promoting children's social, emotional, and academic development (McDoniel et al., 2022; Soininen, et al., 2023).

CLASS is categorized into three domains that support children's learning and development: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support (Head Start, 2025).

- **Emotional Support** assesses how educators establish and promote a positive learning community. Classrooms that score well have teachers that are responsive to children, acknowledge children's feelings or emotions, help children resolve problems, redirect challenging behavior, and support positive peer relationships.
- **Classroom Organization** assesses how educators provide classroom routines and procedures related to management of children's behavior, time, and attention in the classroom. It assesses classroom routines and procedures related to the organization and management of children's behavior, time and attention in the classroom. Classrooms feature consistent schedules, well-designed learning centers, established routines, and sensitive and appropriate guidance strategies.
- **Instructional Support** assesses how educators implement curriculum and communication strategies to foster cognitive and language development. Instructional Support assesses the ways in which teachers implement the curriculum to effectively promote cognitive and language development. This domain measures how teachers support and extend children's thinking, problem solving and conversational skills, and vocabulary.

While providers already have accreditation options like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA), CLASS serves as an additional way for programs to demonstrate the health, safety, and well-being of children through standards for operations, environment, and staff to be considered for Preschool Open Door (POD) subsidies. POD funding supports families who are experiencing economic hardships and helps them access preschool programs. This aligns with the state's mixed delivery system approach, supporting not only public preschool expansion but also allowing private providers to offer affordable options through POD.

Methodology

There were two implementation phases supported by the PDG B-5 renewal grant: Phase I: CLASS Baseline Setting, and Phase II: Class Coaching/Training. Phase I was a Baseline Setting study intended to ascertain current program quality and future program quality

thresholds in the state of Hawai'i measured via CLASS student-teacher interactions. CLASS baseline scores were recorded across the Hawaiian Islands from 45 CLASS observations of licensed group child care providers. CLASS observers were recruited and certified, and observations were conducted at various sites. Once CLASS data was collected, data was analyzed and offered to DHS to better inform future Preschool Open Door (POD) funding dissemination. With Phase I completed in offering a snapshot of ECCE program quality, the Department of Human Services (DHS) would have the option to utilize the CLASS study in determining a CLASS satisfactory threshold for future POD funding.

Phase 2 involved pre- and post-observations, debrief meetings, workshop sessions addressing the three CLASS domains, and an optional individual CLASS support session with each of ECE program participants.

Measure

We developed a CLASS Survey instrument to assess participants' experiences and the impact of CLASS Phase II coaching. The survey evaluated participants' knowledge, confidence, application, and improvements in classroom experiences across the three CLASS domains: (1) Emotional support; (2) Classroom organization; and (3) Instructional support, using a 4-point Likert scale of agreement. The survey also examined the relevance of the CLASS training in the teachers' professional work and their overall satisfaction with the training.

Moreover, the survey gathered qualitative feedback for in-depth reflections on the training, motivation for participating, and suggestions for improvement. Demographic information, such as gender, education levels, and ECE professional experience, were collected to provide context for the findings.

The survey was administered at the conclusion of Phase II, from December 2024 to January 2025 online via Google Forms, with an option for hardcopy completion during in-person meetings. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Participants

Three cohorts participated in CLASS Phase I and Phase II. Participation occurred in three stages, reflecting various levels of engagement and support during the two CLASS phases:

1. Participants were observed and debriefed during one CLASS training round (n = 21).
2. Participants were observed and debriefed during one CLASS training round. In addition, they scheduled a post-debriefing session. Other school staff may have attended these training sessions (n = 10).
3. Participants did all of the above and have received additional or explicit coaching on specific CLASS domains and the scores from their observations (n = 7).

Five out of the nine preschools involved in Phase I elected to participate in Phase II. Since cohort 1 did not receive workshop training of CLASS, they were excluded from the survey. Among Cohorts 2 and 3, eleven (11) teachers, two (2) teacher assistants, and four (4) administrators who were directly or indirectly associated with Phase 2 CLASS training were invited to participate in the survey (n = 17). Seven (7) individuals responded, resulting in a 41% participation rate.

Survey participants included one (1) assistant teacher, two (2) administrators, and four (4) lead teachers. All of the five participating preschools on Kauai and Oʻahu were represented. All have more than ten (10) years of professional experience in the ECE field, except one who indicated having 3–5 years of experience. The educational background of the participants included Associate Degree (3), Bachelor's degree (2), Master's degree (1), and Doctorate or Professional degree (1). Four (4) participants indicated that their school is serving multilingual learners.

Results

The CLASS survey results indicate high levels of agreement across all domains, demonstrating the training's overall positive impact.

Participants' Motivation

Participants were motivated by a desire to improve their teaching practices, stay updated on better strategies, and meet program requirements. One participant shared, "What motivated me was my desire to improve in teaching and to keep up-to-date with better teaching strategies."

Others joined based on leadership recommendations or prior positive experiences, with one participant noting, "I had previously had a one-day training and loved it." Some participated to qualify for Preschool Open Door (POD) funds, while others saw it as a valuable opportunity for growth, stating, "This training is much needed."

CLASS Domains

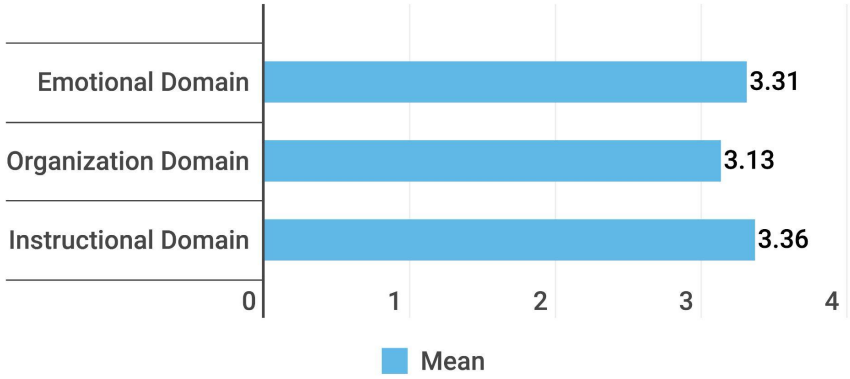
Across CLASS domains, participants reported significant improvements in knowledge and confidence gains. Figure 1 below presents the means of the CLASS domains, and tables in Appendix 1 include the means, standard deviations, and ranges for all survey items.

In the Emotional Support Domain, 100% felt more responsive to children's emotional needs and confident in fostering positive peer relationships, while 85.71% applied skills to support academic needs, with one respondent indicating not applicable.

In the Classroom Organization Domain, participants' responses range from "strongly agree" to "agree," with one participant responding "not applicable" to all items, and only one participant saying "disagree." In the responses, 85.71% indicated improving their understanding and application of classroom procedures and behavior management. However, only 71.43% reported enhancing overall classroom organization, indicating room for improvement in this area.

The Instructional Support Domain showed the strongest results, with 100% of participants gaining confidence in providing quality feedback and supporting children's language and cognitive development. These findings highlight the training's positive impact across all domains, with some areas for continued growth.

Figure 1
Means of the Three CLASS Domains on a 4-Point Likert Scale of Agreement (N = 7)



Source: Authors.

Participation, Relevance, and Satisfaction

Participants overwhelmingly found the CLASS training valuable and relevant to their professional roles. 100% agreed that participating in the training was beneficial, and 100% found it both helpful and scheduled at a convenient time. Additionally, 85.7% reported receiving administrative support to participate.

The training was highly relevant to participants' work and relationships with students, with 100% affirming its applicability. Furthermore, all participants (100%) expressed satisfaction with the quality of the training, the knowledge gained, its delivery, and the feedback received, highlighting the program's overall effectiveness and positive impact.

Learning, Support, and Improvements

Participants reported that the CLASS training significantly enhanced their teaching practices, providing valuable insights into classroom organization, student engagement, and instructional strategies. One participant shared, "The CLASS training has provided me with the knowledge of classroom organization and how to better manage my teaching with my children." Others highlighted how the training helped them reflect on evolving teaching strategies, with one experienced educator noting, "My teacher training began over 40 years ago, and different strategies have been focused on during the past years."

When asked about the most helpful aspects of the training, participants emphasized practical applications, individualized feedback, and structured observations. Many valued the debriefing sessions, which allowed them to analyze their teaching approaches, with one participant stating, "The observations and debriefing sessions allowed me to reflect and learn from what was observed." One-on-one feedback was also highly praised, particularly the trainers' support, with a participant noting, "My one-on-one feedback session gave me insights on what I could improve on as well as my strengths."

For future improvements, participants suggested more practical opportunities, mentoring, and targeted reviews of low-scoring areas. Some recommended observations at different times of the day and the possibility of structuring the training by domain.

Overall, the survey results reflect a strong appreciation for the training, with many participants expressing a desire for others to experience the same program due to its impactful and supportive approach.

Conclusion

The CLASS Survey results from Phase II demonstrate the positive impact of the training on participants' teaching practices. The survey developed for this study served as a critical tool for evaluating the CLASS coaching program, helping to refine and enhance future efforts. Across all domains, participants reported significant improvements in knowledge, confidence, and application. With 100% satisfaction in training quality and delivery, participants highlighted the value of practical applications, individualized feedback, and debriefing sessions. Recommendations for improvement included more practice opportunities, mentoring, and varied observations. Based on the positive feedback, it is recommended to continue the CLASS training with a focus on more domain-specific support and individualized coaching to further enhance teaching practices.

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Appendix

Descriptive Statistics for CLASS Training

Table 1

Participant Responses to CLASS Training by Domain on a 4-Point Likert Scale (N = 7)

Domain	Survey Item	Mean	SD	Min Score	Max Score
Emotional Support Domain	My knowledge has improved in the emotional support domain.	3.43	.54	3	4
	I am confident to apply the knowledge gained to support positive peer relationships.	3.14	.38	3	4
	I have applied skills gained to support children's academic needs.	3.33	.52	3	4
	I am more responsive to children's emotional needs	3.29	.49	3	4
Emotional Support Domain		3.31	.33	3.00	3.75
Classroom Organization Domain	My knowledge has improved in the classroom organization domain.	3.17	.41	3	4
	I am confident to apply the knowledge gained in classroom procedures.	3.33	.52	3	4
	I have applied skills gained to support children's behavior.	3.17	.41	3	4
	I have improved the quality of my classroom organization.	2.83	.41	2	3
Classroom Organization Domain		3.13	.31	3.00	3.75
Instructional Support Domain	My knowledge has improved in the instructional support domain.	3.43	.54	3	4

	I am confident to apply the skills gained in providing quality feedback to children.	3.29	.49.	3	4
	I have applied skills gained to support children‘s language development.	3.43	.54	3	4
	I have applied skills gained to support children‘s cognitive development.	3.29	.49	3	4
Instructional Support Domain		3.36	.40	3.00	4.00

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for CLASS Training by Domain on a 4-Point Likert Scale (N = 7)

Domain	Mean	SD	Min Score	Max Score
Emotional Support Domain	3.31	.33	3.00	3.75
Classroom Organization Domain	3.13	.31	3.00	3.75
Instructional Support Domain	3.36	.40	3.00	4.00

Table 3

Participation, Relevance and Satisfaction With CLASS Training on a 4-Point Likert Scale (N = 7)

	Survey Item	Mean	SD	Min Score	Max Score
Participation	The CLASS training was helpful.	3.43	.54	3	4
	The CLASS training was scheduled at a time that fit my school schedule.	3.43	.54	3	4
	I received support from my administration to participate in the CLASS training.	3.67	.52	3	4
Participation		3.48	.50	3	4
Relevance	The CLASS training's content was relevant to my work.	3.57	.54	3	4
	The CLASS training's content was relevant to my relationships with students.	3.57	.54	3	4
Relevance		3.57	.53	3	4
Satisfaction	The overall quality of the CLASS training.	3.57	.54	3	4
	The learning or knowledge gained during the CLASS training.	3.43	.54	3	4
	The delivery of the CLASS training.	3.57	.54	3	4
	The feedback received from the CLASS training.	3.71	.49	3	4
Satisfaction		3.57	.47	3	4