

Beyond a Fish Tank & Dead Fish: Making the Shift to Continuous Quality Improvement

By Ann Hentschel, M.Ed.

The scene has grown all too familiar. Hard working, dedicated teachers of young children are getting their classroom ready for the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) assessment. This is code for staging the environment for the day of a classroom assessment. One teacher, Patrick Romero, confides in the process his team used several years ago. He poignantly states, “We put a fish tank with a fish in the classroom for the ECERS, but the fish kept dying. We never stopped to consider how to make this a better place for fish to live. We did not reflect on why the ECERS encourages children to have opportunities to care for nature and living things. Our focus was on earning points and checking off items on our ECERS to-do list.”

The good news is that like the young children we serve, we as educators continue to grow and learn. There is a new movement afoot to move beyond scores and checklists. Patrick shares more of his story of the fish tank and dead fish. He explains, “We were missing the point I think, and didn't have the capacity to sustain the change. Then one year our children were very interested in fish so we decided to make it a topic of study. We thought it's finally time we figure out how to keep fish alive, and let's include the children in that process. We spent half of the year talking with parents, visiting pet stores, and researching fish until we were prepared to set up our tank with heaters, filters, air pumps, plants, and fish that get along. Then we spent the rest of the year studying our pets, documenting our observations, and investigating our questions. I know that living things is one tiny part of the ECERS, but we needed to prepare for the change, get the information and resources we needed to make the change, think deeply about the change as a team of teachers, children, and families, and then follow up with continued reflection and inquiry. Most importantly we as teachers needed to be invested in guiding the process and owning this improvement.

Patrick's story is a powerful example of using assessment tools like the ECERS as a means for reflecting and deepening our teaching practices. Here are a few examples of using reflective questions when studying the ECERS:

- Why is it important for children to be able to use art materials in their own way?
- What happens for a child when his teacher shows positive interest in his choice to spend time independently looking at a book?
- What message does it convey to families when inclusion of diversity is part of their children's learning activities?
- What learning activities are real strengths in our classroom environment?
- Is language and literacy an area our team wants to strengthen this year?

Tools like the ECERS are filled with opportunities to examine aspects of developmentally appropriate practices. They allow us to focus our lens on specific areas for continuous quality improvement. At the end of this article is an exercise for teachers to use in reflecting on their improvement efforts related to an item in an assessment tool.

It's ironic that classroom assessment tools have been viewed as something that is being done *to* us. In the past it was common to hear that we are being “ECERized.” Fortunately, the tide is shifting and the emphasis is on using such tools to illustrate the multitude of important aspects that go into teaching young children. Many have used these type of valid and reliable tools to advocate for funds to improve the environment or strengthen professional development. Most importantly we are reinvigorating the effort to do what is best for the children. Let's continue on this path and be done with the days when a fish tank and a fish are put in a classroom for the ECERS.

Ann Hentschel is the ECE Quality Research and Program Development Manager at Branagh Information Group. Ann has been in the field of early childhood education for over 30 years. Her passion is developing ways to support teachers and program leaders in providing high quality early learning. Most recently, Ann was McCormick Center's director of quality assessment where she oversaw the implementation of quality assessments and training of technical assistance specialists for the QRIS initiative in Illinois. Ann is coauthor of two books; *A Great Place to Work* and *Inspiring Peak Performance* with Paula Jorde Bloom and Jill Bella.

Branagh Information Group (BIG) builds data systems with an emphasis on early childhood. BIG is the creator of the ERS Data System, a leading-edge Tablet PC implementation of the Environment Rating Scales® (ECERS-3™, ECERS-R™, ITERS-R™, FCCERS-R™, and SACERS-Updated™) and the Program Administration Scales (PAS, BAS).

ERS Reflective Study of Quality Improvement Exercise

The purpose of this exercise is to support a teacher or family child care provider engaged in continuous quality improvement using one of the Environment Rating Scales (e.g. ECERS-R, ITERS-R, FCCERS-R, SACERS-U). They are invited to share evidence that illustrates meeting the criteria for an ERS item that strengthens the quality of the classroom or family child care home. The evidence might be in the form of a video clip, photograph, piece of children's work, etc.

Instructions:

1. One teacher or family child care provider silently places in front of the group evidence of her/his quality improvement.
2. The other members of the group take time to review the evidence and silently fill in the boxes below.
3. In round robin fashion, members of the group share their reflections. The person presenting the evidence remains silent but can take notes of the group's comments.
4. The last step is for the teacher to respond to the group's reflections and for the whole group to debrief on what they learned.

| | |
|---|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Description</p> <p>Examine the evidence of change and provide a description of it. Just the facts please!</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Questions</p> <p>In reviewing the evidence of change, what do you find yourself wondering about?</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Opinion</p> <p>How does this evidence link to effective teaching practices?</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Success</p> <p>Does this evidence of change meet the criteria for a particular item or indicator? What are the next steps to further refine this aspect of practice?</p> |

