

# Recalibrating Quality Improvement: *Who's in the Driver's Seat?*

A dialogue between Margie Carter and Ann Hentschel

Ann Hentschel has greatly contributed to my thinking about the use of quality assessment tools and environment rating scales. Before our conversations, I'd heard many examples of ways these tools were disheartening people and I wanted to discount the usefulness of this approach to raising quality. But Ann has patiently stayed in dialogue with me, pointing out that I tend to hang out in decent programs, not ones where children are strapped in high chairs in front of televisions or places where the



Ann Hentschel has worked in early childhood education for over 30 years. She is the director of quality assessment at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, where she oversees the implementation of quality assessments and training of technical assistance specialists for the Illinois quality rating and improvement system. Prior to joining the McCormick Center, Ann worked for many years as a toddler and preschool teacher and as a child care director. She is passionate about supporting teachers and administrators on their path of creating high-quality early childhood programs.

Margie Carter is in her fifth decade of work in the ECE field as a teacher, adult educator, author, and consultant. She shares Ann's passion for seeing that those doing the day-to-day work in early childhood centers should be actively engaged in making quality assessments and rating scales tools for their own action research. A new chapter in the new, second edition of *Designs for Living and Learning* expands on the ideas of this article. Margie thanks her Harvest Resources Associates, Wendy Cividanes and Debbie Lebo for their critical insights on what empowers and disempowers teachers in using rating scales and assessment tools, and Nadia Jaboneta for providing an important example. To learn more about Margie's work with Harvest Resources Associates visit [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).



teacher sets a timer and children are rotated through interest centers at 15-minute intervals. "For the sake of children in these environments, I welcome some level of accountability to justify funding," Hentschel says, and I have to agree with her. The questions for me are: What should that look like? and How can we do this in a non-punitive way for hard-working, under-paid teachers? How can we help program leaders use these tools to support teachers' voices in decision making? How can we use these tools to support reflective teaching, not just rule following?

In our country we have far too many centers where children are in mediocre care at best, with some in pitiful environments, especially in programs with very limited funding serving low-income families. Our dialogue has gone back and forth in recent years, with Ann and I being each other's 'critical friend,' not just agreeing to disagree, but, instead, probing with critical questions, seeking deeper understandings, and finding new common ground.

## Focusing the Dialogue

**AH:** I recall when the first edition of *Designs for Living and Learning* was published teachers were racing out to

purchase table lamps, wicker baskets, and sheer fabric to hang in their cozy area. They wanted the environment to look nice like the images in the book, but I'm not sure how many reflected deeply about the intention behind these additions to the space. The same is true with assessment tools like the Environment Rating Scales (ERS); teachers want to earn those high ratings without much thought as to why these items are considered indicators of quality.

**MC:** I think you are spot on about this, Ann. You've named what was initially the biggest concern Deb Curtis and I had about the *Designs for Living and Learning* book; we feared that people would just try to copy the environments in the beautiful photos and not think about the "why" behind them. In the second edition of the book we are emphasizing in a stronger way how to transform an environment using a reflective process. We emphasize again and again the importance of a program clarifying their values, their view of children, and their understanding of the teaching and learning process so that their physical environment, routines, and interactions intentionally reflect these values.

**AH:** The idea of program administrators and teachers clarifying their values, their view of children, and how they understand the teaching and learning process resonates with me. Over the years, I have come to believe there is a genuine connection between quality and whether the program has a strong set of shared values and goals. ExceleRate Illinois, our state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), is using the visual image of a building as the framework for thinking about continuous quality improvement. Everyone understands that the foundation is critical in any building. Our belief is the key components of the foundation for continuous quality improvement are shared values and goals, trust, and data-driven decision making. We define these terms in the following way:

- **Shared values and goals:** A clear understanding and support of a program's direction and purpose.
- **Trust:** Each member of the team feels valued, respected, and supported. They believe they are in a safe place.
- **Data-driven decision making:** Decisions are made using facts and

information about the program based on results from the assessment tools.

Without these foundational components in place it is virtually impossible to move forward with an initiative to improve quality.

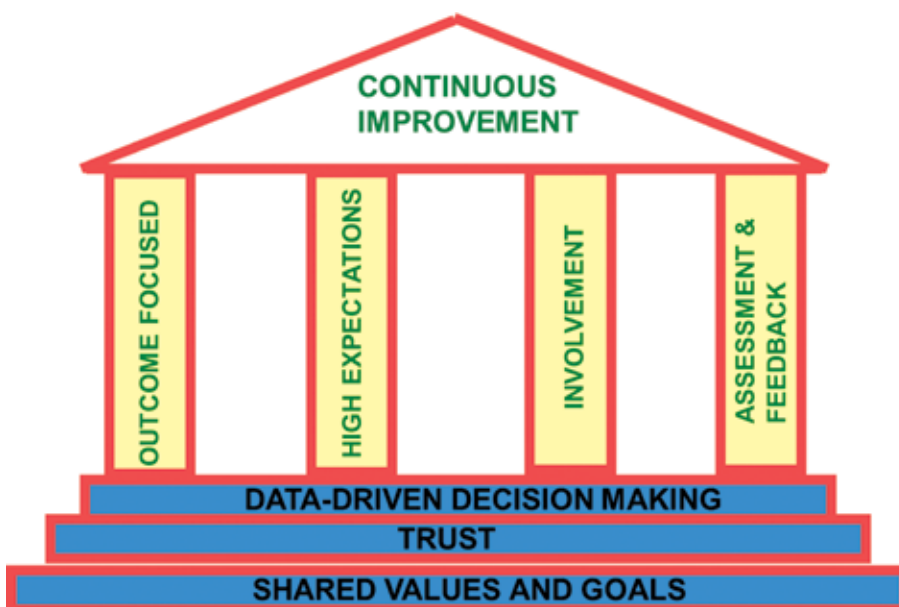
My own view about the use of quality assessment tools has shifted in recent years, too. I see their value not only in providing concrete guidance to mediocre programs, but also to support *all* programs serving young children to engage in a process of continuous quality improvement. Many states, including Illinois, are creating a QRIS with an emphasis less on rating and more on supporting program improvement. We all have room to grow, learn, and improve.

**MC:** I think many administrators and teachers, along with assessors using the rating scales, have a narrow view of how getting high ratings relates to quality. They often interpret this to mean only prescribed and quantifiable items in the environment and eliminating any possible risk. This easily leads to a space that is either too cluttered or sterile or

has a catalog cookie-cutter feeling, with no identity of the community or natural world they are part of. Even in programs with high ratings I typically see materials, routines, and schedules that don't sustain children's attention. Additionally, when the environment doesn't give children a sense of power, accommodate their big energy, or engage their curious minds, they become bored, unfocused, and often rebellious. In my mind, this leads to a climate that is ultimately unsafe. We must ask ourselves: What's the risk of not allowing children to take risks? As I've written elsewhere (Carter, 2014), in other countries we see policies reflecting a greater understanding that children learn and gain confidence as they take on social, physical, and cognitive risks. I believe that for both children and teachers, our profession should be nurturing the disposition to experiment and risk trying new things. But, instead, we seem to be discouraging this as an approach to learning. We seem to be more interested in conforming and compliance, not innovation.

**AH:** I agree with your perspective about the need to allow children to take risks. And, in my opinion, we do need a certain amount of conforming and compliance in the field of early childhood education. I am looking at this through the lens of what our young children need and deserve in the way of development and learning. Why would we *not* want to establish a set of high expectations for what is in the best interest of children? I don't think we can hold a position that we want more funding and better compensation for teachers, but leave us alone and don't make us accountable for the work we do with children. It seems we should want programs that are willing to be in compliance with standards and be able to innovate within the context of those standards.

I think you are absolutely correct that many have a narrow view of how get-



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ting high ratings relates to quality. Why is that so? Could it be a lack of understanding regarding the assessment tool or an inability to see the connection between developmentally appropriate practice and the quality indicators in the tool?

I am intrigued with your statement that, “even in programs with high ratings I typically see materials, routines, and schedules that don’t sustain children’s attention.” Perhaps we might break this down into two parts of a system to improve quality in early childhood education. First there are the programs that are not achieving the high ratings in their QRIS. Sadly, there are environments for young children which limit very basic risk taking, situations that should be considered basic childhood rights. Many programs do not allow children to make their own decisions about where they want to play, how they want to use materials, and with whom. The focus seems to be on maintaining order and control.

Richard Clifford, one of the authors of ERS, has acknowledged that tools like ECERS-R, ITERS-R, and SACERS have been particularly strong in measuring the basics for programs at the lower end of the continuum of quality. I tend to agree. And while it may feel very prescribed and quantifiable, there are programs that require very basic guidance on what needs to be in place to support children’s growth and development. A tool that helps them break quality down into small steps is not a bad thing. For example, does the classroom have a soft, cozy place for children to relax? Is there a space for privacy away from the big energy activities? Does the schedule allow children to have access to a variety of materials for a substantial portion of the day? In my opinion, if the environment rating scales provide guidance to move mediocre programs

towards a better level of quality, that is a significant contribution to children in those programs.

And, obviously we want to move good programs towards greatness. That gets to the second part of the quality equation, addressing programs that have high ratings in terms of materials, routines, and schedules but don’t sustain children’s attention. There is growing research that indicates the emotional climate and quality of interactions in the classroom demonstrate promise for increasing the levels of quality. These are dimensions measured using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Recently a child care director shared with me that her program started with the ERS and moved to using the CLASS to conduct their own self-assessments. She explained that when they started using the CLASS they began to see significant improvements in creating a rich learning environment for children. This is a great example of how some programs are ready to do more in the way of nurturing the disposition to experiment and risk trying new things.

**MC:** But here again my question is whether any assessment tool alone can improve quality, or whether good tools must be used in the service of reflection to rethink quality and change practice.

**AH:** To my way of thinking they play one small piece in the equation to engage in continuous quality improvement. Returning to the house framework, the foundation includes shared values and goals, trust, and data-driven decision making. Ideally, the program reviews the data provided from an ERS or CLASS assessment and determines where they want to focus on making improvements.

**MC:** Conceptually, this sounds like a useful way for assessment data to

motivate quality improvement, but from what I’m hearing, it just isn’t experienced this way, for whatever reason. I know these tools weren’t initially designed with funding attached to scores, but that is how they are being used now. And teachers feel that every year a new tool is added to the ones they are already required to use, eating up their limited time, adding stress, and sucking the joy out of their work. In many cases they feel this is just another requirement that narrows, not expands, their thinking. Many don’t feel like any choice is given to them about what improvements they want to make; they are told to conform, not innovate. I don’t know whether this problem stems from the assessor or the program leader’s use of the tools. Part of the problem, it seems to me, is that the teachers’ own observation stories aren’t solicited and seen as valid data for decision making.

**AH:** I recognize that some program administrators and teachers find participation in a QRIS initiative to be burdensome. That is why in Illinois we are creating a system that focuses on the idea of continuous quality improvement. We want to move away from coaches and technical assistance specialists coming in and telling programs what they need to fix. Instead, they work alongside the program administrator and teaching team as learning partners to determine areas for improvement. The focus is on making small, incremental changes based on the areas where the teacher wants to make improvements. We provide strategies to promote reflection and encourage opportunities for teachers to gather and share their learning and effective practices with one another. A worksheet we have developed, “Getting to Know the Assessment Tool” offers an example of how teachers can gather and share their reflections and understandings of an item or dimension of an assessment tool. After they have engaged in con-

versation about the item, they generate ideas for how to improve practice. At a follow up meeting they are invited to share their observations about the impact these changes made to supporting children's learning.

## Empowering Teachers

**MC:** When a teacher has been thoughtful and made a conscious choice to meet the intent of the criteria differently than what is expected, where is the appeal process for a lower score they receive on the scale? If there isn't one, how can the teacher feel he or she has a voice? I know you've said the expectation is not to achieve the highest rating across all aspects of global quality, but it can be very demoralizing for an intentional teacher to receive a low score; in some cases, this can lead to a fissure with his or her supervisor.

I'm thinking of a preschool teacher, Nadia, who observed that her children were no longer using the blocks, and found the children saying, "It's too hard to put them away and it takes too long." She discussed this with Deb Curtis, a consultant in her program at the time, who suggested Nadia try putting all the blocks in baskets rather than on labeled shelves. After conferring with her co-workers Nadia tried this and BINGO, the children enthusiastically returned to block play. Nadia has a very supportive director, but she will face a lower score on the ECERS when the assessors arrive. She says, "I am ready to explain and support my decision and describe all the other ways children are classifying, sorting, and learning about shapes." I would say that this is a case of Nadia using her own data to drive her decision making. Is it fair her score for the blocks will be lower?

**AH:** This is a terrific example of empowering the teacher to focus on making improvements that are in the best interest of her classroom. I don't see

the need to appeal anything. We should celebrate her choice to stay aligned with her program's values and still provide a high-quality experience for block play. Nadia has made an intentional choice to not have her blocks stored on an open labeled shelf. This means she will earn a score of six on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) item for blocks rather than a score of seven. This is still considered at the excellent level of quality.

**MC:** But why wouldn't you want to give extra points, not demerits, to a teacher who has demonstrated such thoughtful reflections and innovation?

**AH:** Your question seems to go back to the issue of compliance versus innovation. Can't we have both? Nadia is absolutely in compliance at the excellent level of quality for block play and she created an innovative solution that works for her group of children.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all children could have a space to build and explore with blocks in meaningful ways? What I've seen over the years are many block areas that become the storage space for large fine-motor materials, plastic wood-working benches, Lego® tables, bins of puzzles, and large plastic airports, gas stations, and other sorts of props. Children have a difficult time knowing what materials to use in the space. At the good level of quality, the ECERS-R assesses whether there is enough space for block play to allow at least three children to successfully balance, build, and create structures independently. Are there enough blocks and block accessories to build complex structures? It is not the intention to demoralize teachers but to offer feedback on opportunities to improve the environment for children. This is a great example of how teachers might get feedback about an opportunity to improve the block area and then innovate new ways to improve the space for children's learning.

**MC:** We are in agreement that we don't want teachers to become demoralized, so what must we put in place to ensure this isn't the result of how the tools are being used? A responsible QRIS system must work with program leaders to create a climate of reflection and excitement about improving quality. That keeps program leaders in the driver's seat.

**AH:** I absolutely agree. We need to empower program leaders with strategies that support embedded professional learning for teachers. And, if there are programs that are not meeting the basic expectations of what young children need, it seems acceptable to give them feedback and guidance. I want all our children to have an opportunity to learn with teachers like Nadia. I don't believe reflection alone is enough to improve quality for children in all programs.

## Engaging Teachers

**MC:** Teachers are ultimately in charge of what happens with the children. This means that QRIS and program leaders must engage them in the process of continuous quality improvement. How can you support teachers in seeing that they are the lead researchers in gathering data about what's working for the children (and themselves) and what's not? What will help them see the connections between their own ongoing observations and the tools? What will encourage innovation beyond traditional notions of quality?

**AH:** Yes, the aim should be to engage teachers in dialogue about continuous quality improvement. We should ask them, based on the results from the assessment tool what intrigues them most? What sparks their interest as an area they want to focus on that relates to children's learning? Too often the perception is that these items or dimensions of quality are being imposed on them rather than looking at these areas through the lens of how they relate to

the important work the teacher is already doing with children.

**MC:** Too often the QRIS standards ARE imposed on teachers without any dialogue to promote this kind of engagement or reflection. What kind of actions are you envisioning when you say teachers should be given voice in determining goals?

**AH:** I happen to believe many of the QRIS initiatives across the country are making shifts based on their own growth and learning from what the data report. I recognize it is a big idea, but my hope is that we work to address the teacher's voice or lack thereof in today's classrooms for young children within the context of QRIS. This begins by having program administrators lay a foundation with a clear understanding of shared values and goals, creating a climate that fosters trust, and promoting opportunities for teachers to review data and determine what areas they want to focus on improving in their classroom. I envision small groups of teachers gathering to review the results of an assessment, considering what aspect of quality they want to focus on, and engaging in critical conversations about how they might enrich and strengthen this aspect of their classroom.

**MC:** Yes, yes, yes! If we did that, I think we'd find some expanded definitions and approaches to quality improvement and teachers might experience this process as one where they *are* trusted as generators of data and their perspective and voice *is* valued.

**AH:** How do we empower teachers to trust in their own ability to inspire children's learning?

**MC:** What an important question, Ann. I want to see that incorporated into all QRIS systems. Unfortunately, until now I think we've been doing quite the opposite, suggesting that teachers aren't

trustworthy and don't know what's best, only the regulators and funders do.

**AH:** I hold a different perspective. States are fortunate to have QRIS systems. These systems provide opportunities for program administrators and teachers to receive technical assistance supports and additional funding. We simply need to work closely in the design of these systems to ensure the type of technical assistance supports include meaningful engagement with the teachers. A child care director recently shared that in recent years he would have had to close his doors if it was not for the funding he received through participation in QRIS.

Unfortunately, there are many programs that do not provide high-quality learning environments for children. My experience is that teachers who work in programs that have established a set of shared values and where they are encouraged and inspired to be intentional in their work do quite well in securing high ratings on assessment scales, accreditation validation visits, and program reviews. These programs have the greatest chance of using QRIS as an opportunity to engage more deeply.

**MC:** I couldn't agree more. Conversations with the teachers will often reveal whether they feel they have an influence on program improvement or are just trying to be compliant.

**AH:** I suspect part of what has happened is many state QRIS initiatives have inadvertently created processes where programs get feedback and technical assistance support that renders them feeling helpless or demoralized. Illinois, Arizona, Delaware, and others are moving away from this model of outside experts coming in to fix what is wrong in a program. They are placing greater emphasis on empowering program administrators and teachers to take the lead on quality improvement.

And, what is particularly exciting is how peer learning teams or communities of practice are an integral part of deepening the understanding of children's learning to improve practice. Your own work related to communities of practice is getting embedded into these systems.

**MC:** This is reassuring to hear. I'm wondering how this looks in practice in these states. What process is being used to get these program administrators and leaders in the driver's seat for quality improvement? What would you like to have leaders thinking and saying and how should QRIS systems be nurturing that?

**AH:** My hope is that program leaders can use their state's QRIS initiative as an opportunity to inspire quality improvement within their program. This will require a willingness to create embedded processes for teachers to meet and reflect on their work. It also means moving to a shared leadership model that ensures involvement from the teachers in reviewing data and establishing goals. When an assessor walks into a program and is greeted with "We are so excited you are here!", it is clear the teachers have a positive opinion of themselves and are open to learning and growing even more deeply.

**MC:** And how affirming for teachers to know that assessors are excited to hear the views of a practitioner on the quality improvement process.

## References

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## Working With, Not Against the Tool

A story by Nadia Jaboneta, Lead Teacher  
Pacific Primary School, San Francisco, California

My first year as a lead teacher using the ECERS tool was quite stressful. Although I understood the intention, I was confused about the amount of time, effort, and money that was spent to get a 'good score.' Teachers were spending large quantities of money on toys and materials from catalogs and making big changes in their classrooms. Still this did not guarantee us the perfect scores we hoped for. It has been a long journey and what I have learned over the past 12 years is that I needed to find a way to use the ECERS tool successfully and find its strengths and commonalities. I have become an advocate for how to work

with the tool, not against it. One of the main things I do and also emphasize to other teachers is that if we already have a quality environment, we should not be changing our entire classrooms. If we are not doing things that are on the indicators, let's think about why and if we should make changes. If there is something I am doing that ECERS says I should do differently, I really take the time to think about it and talk to my team and director. Is it really something we support and believe in? Do we really want to change it? As I look at the tools more reflectively with my observations, I sometimes make changes that go against my score. For instance, to get the highest score of 7, ECERS says blocks need to be on the shelves organized by shape. I saw the children in my classroom were no longer using the blocks, saying, "It's too hard to put them away and it takes too long." I used this as an opportunity for teacher research and thinking more about my practice with children. I asked myself:

- What is the intention of this measure?
- What is the reason for labeling the blocks by shape? (Independent use, so children know where to put blocks, classifying, sorting, taking care of our space.)
- What do I value about the block area and the way the children are using the materials? What touches my heart and mind?
- How can I work with the ECERS tool and support the specific needs of the children in my classroom?
- What other opportunities am I providing the children for sorting and classifying (besides blocks)?
- Am I planning the space thoughtfully?
- Am I thinking with intention?



Inspired by the *Thinking Lens*, a tool for reflection developed by Margie Carter, Deb Curtis, and Ann Pelo, I sought out the children's perspective and asked my teaching team for their insight. As suggested by the children, we put blocks in a large basket and let children put blocks anywhere on the shelf. I used my observations and reflections to change the environment and revive the children's interest in block play with new storage and additional play props on the shelves. The children re-engaged in block play with new creativity and complexity. I feel that once it is time to have my ECERS assessment, I am ready to explain and support my decision and describe all the other ways children are independent and are classifying, sorting, and learning about shapes.

Photographs by the authors

