

Supporting Teachers in Quality Improvement: What Program Leaders Need to Know

BY NASSER NABHAN, ED.D.

"The thing I remember best about successful people I've met all through the years is their obvious delight in what they're doing and it seems to have very little to do with worldly success. They just love what they're doing, and they love it in front of others." - Fred Rogers

I remember being a preschool teacher in Chicago and the state assessor coming into my classroom to observe me. I was nervous and not entirely clear about what they were observing, so I decided to just continue with my day as usual. Several months later, I sat down with a coach, and we reviewed my scores together. After being a teacher, I became an administrator at a Head Start program and saw assessment from a leadership angle. Now, as an assessor, my experiences have come full circle. Instead of being the person in the classroom teaching, I am now the one behind the assessment scales observing teachers, and there are quite a few things that I have learned from this journey.

Being a leader in an early childhood setting includes having a constant eye toward quality improvement. That can become difficult given the many directions leaders are pulled in daily. Establishing quality improvement systems becomes that much more necessary due to these circumstances. Below are important strategies that early childhood leaders can use to establish high-quality programs:

- **Think of leadership as a collective movement.** Teachers bring incredible knowledge and expertise that should be leveraged to create program quality. Including teachers in the mission, vision, and planning builds buy-in and confidence in the policies leaders must implement to move the program forward.
- **Learn about your state's quality improvement system.** Review the Environmental Rating Scales (ECERS-3, ITERS-R/3, SACERS, FCCERS) and CLASS assessment scales thoroughly and provide these to teachers. Find and use coaching resources. If you have questions about an item or section, reach out to a coach or program administrator for clarification.
- **Focus on what is within your control.** Buildings and locations may not be spaces you can change, but you have influence over teacher-child interactions, materials, furniture placement, schedules, and compliance paperwork. Consider moving the classroom furniture to create well-defined centers filled with relevant and engaging materials, or make scheduling changes that limit the time children wait during transitions. What can you identify as challenges? What can you move, shift, add, change or work on to increase quality? What would improve the experiences of children and families?

- **Take small steps over time toward specific goals.** Cycles of quality improvement should include providing ongoing support for trying new strategies, talking to parents and staff about goals they want to achieve, and revisiting changes over time to evaluate how things are working. The process should emphasize tangible changes within an achievable timeframe.
- **Be confident in what you have learned and know.** I have assessed hundreds of different programs (infants-preschool). Most of the teachers I have observed are doing incredible things for children. Even those that need more concentrated support in some areas are still doing amazing teaching in other areas. Leverage those positive skills for further improvement, and encourage your staff to grow and try new things. Confidence is key to quality, especially with a strength-based mindset.

Quality improvement is a continuous process. Recognizing that it will take time, effort, and several iterations will help you along the way. Remember to celebrate the successes. Acknowledging all you and the staff have done for children and families is vital to sustaining the program. As you journey through the quality improvement cycles, take these tips with you and be kind to yourself as you do.

RESOURCES

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