



Using Classroom Assessments to Make Small Sustainable Changes

BY KATIE GAUL

Early childhood program administrators and programs are increasingly expected to participate in formal classroom assessments for various accountability purposes. This article focuses on how classroom assessment data can also be used by teaching staff to make small, intentional changes in daily practice that lead to meaningful and lasting benefits for children. It is designed to help administrators understand how assessment results can translate into actionable strategies, enabling them to better support staff, guide professional learning, and ensure assessment practices are connected to continuous improvement rather than compliance alone.

As a former classroom teacher, I still remember how anxious I felt when an assessor entered my classroom to complete an observation. Opening my classroom door to someone I didn't know and using an assessment tool I only had a basic understanding of left me feeling vulnerable.

After changing roles and observing hundreds of classrooms over the past several years, I wish, as a teacher, I had a better understanding of the tools used, their purposes, and how the data would be used. I wish I had known that the assessor and I had a shared interest in our work. We were both working to bring about better outcomes for the children in my classroom.

After the initial CLASS® assessment of my classroom, I remember comparing scores with colleagues after the school day, noting the areas where we scored higher. However, we did not focus much on the areas where our scores were lower. We viewed this experience as a summative assessment, and we did not revisit the scores as a group. Some of us independently looked further into the data and attempted to integrate aspects into our practices. However, there was no systematic approach in place. This was a missed opportunity to work together as a staff to grow and improve practices. Many classroom assessments lend themselves to continuous quality improvement. Teachers can use the data to identify their strengths and areas for needed improvement and build upon them.

To set staff up for success, it is helpful if they are familiar with the assessment tools before the day of their observation. Training about assessment tools can take place during professional development days, staff meetings, or team meetings. All assessment tools in current use are research-based, and items should therefore be embedded in daily practice. When items are incorporated into the typical classroom routine, teachers can relax and do what they normally do, rather than being preoccupied with remembering what the assessor is looking for. You can use assessment manuals to help guide and incorporate these practices.

After an observation, programs typically receive a detailed report that shows scores and highlights the classroom's strengths and opportunities. Remember that the assessor is not only observing the lead teacher but also all staff members who work directly with children for most of the day in the classroom,

and therefore, the scores reflect these combined efforts. It's important to take some time to carefully review the feedback. Just as we take a strengths-based approach with the children, we want to take the same approach with teachers and staff. Highlight their strengths and empower them to be a resource to others who need assistance in the areas where they excel. This is one of the greatest, untapped resources of your program.

James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits*, offers guidance in developing habits to gradually increase success over time. Below are a few suggestions to get started.

Focus on who you wish to become

- Be specific about whom you want to become.
- Say: "I want to have warm, supportive interactions with the children," instead of "I want to score higher in Staff-child interactions."
- Observable actions:
 - I speak to children calmly and politely.
 - I make frequent positive contact: smiles, eye contact.
 - I get down on the children's level to talk or listen.

Track habits, not scores

- Say: "I want to develop systems, not goals," instead of consistently thinking about ECERS-3 scores.
- Track observable actions:
 - The number of times staff help children avoid conflict
 - The number of opportunities children have to work together on projects
 - The number of dramatic play props representing different cultures or races
 - The number of conversations about math while playing in a non-math area

The power of tiny changes over time

- The power of 1%: If you can improve by 1% every day for one year, you'll be thirty-seven times better.
- Say: "I want to make tiny observable changes," instead of "I want a 7 in 'Helping children expand vocabulary.'"
- Observable actions:
 - I will introduce a new word during the science activity.
 - I will respond to what a child says once and further expand on their idea during learning centers.
 - I will repeat English words in Spanish during lunch time when speaking to ESL students.

The focus should be on realistic goals. If a classroom scores a two, raising it to a three or four is impactful and more attainable than scoring a seven. Small, consistent changes lead to sustained improvements over time and yield better learning outcomes for children, something we all strive for.

Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic habits: An easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones*. Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House

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