

ECERS-3: IDENTIFYING GAPS AND EQUITY CHALLENGES FOCUS GROUP THEMES



This report summarizes themes that emerged from six listening sessions held in April 2022 with Black and Latine Pre-K teachers, directors, and technical assistance providers. The purpose of the listening sessions was to understand participants' perceptions of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3) and to gauge the extent to which the tool is culturally grounded.

METHODS

We recruited users of the ECERS-3 with particular attention to Black and Latine¹ Pre-K teachers, directors, and technical assistance providers. We held six sessions, four with Black participants and two with Latine participants, led by Black and Latine facilitators, respectively. One of the Latine sessions was conducted in Spanish. There were 48 respondents, 34 Black and 14 Latine, from nine states. Based on a question in the recruitment survey, all participants rated their familiarity with the ECERS-3 as “very familiar.”

Listening session questions were designed to capture the following information: (1) What strengths in classroom practices related to global quality from the child’s perspective are not captured by ECERS-3? (2) What aspects of programs appear to be related to lower classroom ratings in classes with Black or Hispanic/Latine teachers? (3) Are there aspects of their teaching or classroom culture that the ECERS-3 is not accurately capturing or rating? (4) How might the racial composition of a school/program/classroom influence ECERS-3 scores? The listening sessions lasted on average 71 minutes (ranging from 35 to 90 minutes) and were recorded for later transcription and coding of data by themes that emerged. One investigator reviewed the transcripts and organized the primary themes, which were later reviewed and confirmed by a second investigator.



¹ Consistent with experts in the field (Melzi et al., 2020), we use “Latine” to refer to individuals whose cultural background originated in Latin America. In U.S. academic circles, “Latinx” is being used as a gender-inclusive term to refer to people from Latin American backgrounds, but Spanish-speakers find that “Latinx” is unpronounceable in Spanish. Therefore, we have opted to use the gender-inclusive term “Latine,” commonly used throughout Spanish-speaking Latin America. Melzi, G., McWayne, C., & Ochoa, W. (2020). Family engagement and Latine children’s early narrative skills. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 1–13.

RESULTS

The following themes emerged from the listening session data. Note that an overarching theme was that the ECERS-3 is a useful tool; many participants praised its comprehensiveness and utility for ensuring a standard of quality for children in center-based classrooms. As one participant noted, the ECERS-3 *“actually hits everything holistically so to think of what is missing is a lot because it’s so much that’s there.”*

1 The race, ethnicity, culture, and language of the children, teacher, and assessor matter for ECERS-3 scoring.

- There are cultural variations in what is considered socially acceptable behavior, such as what is “raucous” play. One Black participant stated, *“I feel that positive interactions look different to different people and sometimes it’s distinguished by culture—at least it’s been in my experience. You know, for example, my grandmother. I knew she loved me to death, and she loved children, but there was a way about her. And you knew [when] she was serious and you knew when she was playful, but sometimes that playfulness ... might look serious to someone else. It might look negative ... to someone else.”*
- There are cultural variations in the ways that teachers may speak to and interact with children based on the race and ethnicity of the child or the cultural composition of the classroom, such as tone of voice or type of discipline. In addition, children may respond differently based on culture. The activities used by teachers may also be culturally nuanced and familiar to children who are from the same racial/cultural background. Regarding tone, one Black participant explained, *“The language may sound harsh to people who have never heard that language before, so don’t use your auntie voice.”*
- Teachers may use children’s home language to communicate information in culturally nuanced ways that children may likely respond to. As a Latine participant noted, *“Say for instance, I go into a class, and they are speaking Spanish, but I don’t know how to speak Spanish. How do I know the quality of the language is there? So it’s like a domino effect.”*



- Children may change their behavior based on the race and/or ethnicity of the assessor due to their familiarity with a member of their own racial and/or ethnic group or lack of familiarity with someone from a different racial and/or ethnic group. A Black participant described this as, *“The kids are going to act completely different than they would have acted if there was an assessor who was the same race.”*
- Assessors’ race, ethnicity, culture, and language background likely influence their perceptions of interactions between children and between children and staff as well as their perceptions of the classroom and program generally. As noted by a Black participant, *“We do reliability checks every single month on different tools, but different assessors definitely have their own personal biases that we need to figure out.”*

2 Economic resources coupled with the racial and ethnic composition of the school/program have implications for ECERS-3 scores.

- Low-resource programs/schools may not be able to purchase new materials. One Black participant stated, *“... and then I’ve been in three-star centers that I’m like y’all deserve that five-star rating, but because of the lack of money and things that they can’t have and can’t afford, they’re not able to get that five-star rating or whatever. But the five-star facility has more money, so they they’re making it look fancy and look nice, but they’re really not giving quality.”*
- Materials that are not new may receive lower ratings. As one Black participant noted, *“I used a lot of found materials and things like that, because as long as it was safe, it’s the function of how the children were using it. But sometimes I’ve been scored low on ECERS, when I don’t know [that in] that person’s mind materials and furnishing should look a certain way. And it might have been repaired, but the repairing of it looks different than what they might be used to, but it’s still functional. I’ve seen that a couple of times and it’s like, but it’s safe, the child is using it, the child loved it, the children are enjoying it, it’s safe, so why are we spending so much time on how it looks?”*
- Some ECERS-3 items require a large number of materials to receive high ratings that low-resource programs cannot afford. As one Black participant stated, *“I could have great interactions, but if I don’t have enough fine motor materials or art materials, so on and so forth, I know that I can only go so far up the scale so they can be a great program.”*
- There can be a lack of attention to the creative use of limited resources and an overemphasis on the number of resources. When asked about creative approaches by teachers that are typically rated lower on the ECERS-3, one Black participant stated, *“I watched the teachers and the kids engaged in Just Dance and it was the most fun, interactive thing. But because there was screen time longer than 10 minutes, they ended up getting lower points.”*

3 Diversity should be integrated into the ECERS-3 assessment.

- Currently there is one “diversity” item that is focused on the quantity of materials rather than quality and content. As a Black participant noted, *“if it just focuses on whether you have three races of baby dolls or if you have any pictures up on the wall, it doesn’t do much to promote diversity.”*
- There is little attention to how diversity is incorporated through language, activities, and interactions. One Latine participant stated, *“...the activity section is tailored to the culture so it’s not just a one [size] fits all... as an observer, when I go in and rate and if I see that I counted something as multicultural because it is multicultural, but the tool doesn’t necessarily do it.”*
- There is a need to incorporate diversity into other aspects of the ECERS-3 similar to how math is integrated and scored. One Black participant talked about their training on the scale and said, *“Some of the information or ways that they’re talking about diversity...I don’t consider that enough diversity to count as an example. But they’re like, oh yeah, if there’s a taco and a croissant, it’s an example of diversity. So I do think that there’s some things in the scales, but I also do think the assessors also matter a lot.”*

4 There is a need to attend to disability as a culture.



- There are varying teaching methods for children with disabilities, and educators must speak to and engage differently with children with disabilities to meet their needs, such as adapting activities. However, the ECERS-3 ratings do not capture these nuanced needs and teaching modifications. One Black participant stated, *“I’ve been in early childhood for a lot of years and [with] typically developing and kids with special needs on the whole spectrum... when they go to school, it’s a big culture shock for a lot of these kids and for the families... all of those things also very much affect children with disabilities.”*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants in the listening sessions recommended the following revisions to the ECERS-3 tool or processes (e.g., training).

Assessors should attend cultural competence (anti-bias) training.

“Diversity” should be a more prominent component of the ECERS-3 tool.

Disability should be considered another aspect of “culture.”

LIMITATIONS

These listening sessions provided rich observations from ECERS-3 users on how this measure can better meet the needs of diverse educators, students, and programs. However, we recognize these findings are not generalizable to all ECERS-3 users. This information will be integrated in future projects with results from secondary data analyses and primary data collection.



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