



Understanding the Montessori Classroom and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale

An Introduction:

With the increased understanding of the importance of the early years in the healthy development of the child, providing a quality early educational experience for all children has become policy and practice at the federal, state and local levels. More and more attention has been given to what high quality programming looks like with evolving systems, standards and criteria for assuring the quality of these programs. Almost every state currently has a Quality Rating and Improvement System with the goals of defining quality to promote positive outcomes for children, providing programs with the tools and supports for improvement, encouraging higher levels of education and quality in the early childhood workforce, and sharing information with families that will assist them in making high quality early education decisions for their children.

Many of these state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) use the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale- revised (ECERS-R). By rating the learning environment on seven sub scales, an overall score provides a measure of quality for a given classroom.

The widely used ECERS-R provides an assessment of overall learning environment quality but does not rate philosophy, curriculum or teaching strategies of a specific system of education. This project developed as a collaborative effort between the Montessori-Now and the NC Rated License Assessment Project with the acknowledgement that specific requirements of the ECERS-R may be met in different ways in different programs. From the beginning of this process, it was acknowledged that the ECERS-R does not assess many aspects of the core principles and components of high quality Montessori education. The ECERS-R does address a wide range of characteristics that are commonly believed to be fundamental to various types of early learning environments and it became evident during this process that these characteristics can be found in high quality Montessori environments. While there are a few ECERS-R items and indicators where there is not complete agreement, the assessment of an environment does not require that any specific program score at the highest level on each item, or subscale, to achieve an overall score which indicates high quality with this tool. With intentional and developmentally appropriate practice it is possible for a high quality Montessori classroom to achieve a high average score without compromising its basic core principles and components.

This goal of this project has been to demonstrate an alignment of best practices in a high quality Montessori environment within the subscales, items and criteria of the ECERS-R. This document is organized by ECERS-r subscales and items and addresses the requirements from a Montessori perspective. Statements are made regarding each item in general so it is important to refer to the ECERS-R to review specific indicator requirements and definitions. By using this document in tandem

with the ECERS-R manual, we can understand and observe how a requirement is expected to be met in the high quality Montessori learning environment.

The Montessori system of education has provided a model for early childhood education worldwide. It has seen tremendous growth over its 100+ year history as its benefits and value for young children have been increasingly appreciated by families from diverse cultures and socio-economic status. This is a model founded on scientific inquiry and observation with a growing body of research demonstrating its validity as a theory of child development and as a system of early childhood education that provides high quality developmentally appropriate practice and education.

At this time, there is no trademark on the use of the name Montessori, and due to its growth and popularity, many programs have used the name to market their programs. There is no national organization or entity that is responsible for oversight, and there are no federal or state regulations that prohibit the use of the term. It is generally understood that a high quality, fully implemented Montessori program will have a specially trained and credentialed Montessori teacher, a philosophy and teaching methods consistent with the Montessori theory of child development, and use the scope and sequence of the curriculum and the research based didactic materials to implement that curriculum. This document has been written with this understanding of high quality.

The ECERS-R assessor (or other early childhood professionals) may find some challenges in observing and rating a Montessori classroom due to the differences in materials and classroom organization as compared to other types of early childhood programs. During the observation, the teacher may be giving individual or small group lessons based on her ongoing formative assessment of needs. Children will be choosing their own activities and may work alone or in a small group. In general, the volume and tone of a Montessori classroom is quiet as a way of limiting distractions and disruptions. It can, then, be difficult to observe or hear specific engagements and interactions. Teachers should be comfortable with the idea that assessors may need to complete their assessment by moving respectfully in the classroom environment, and standing close to the teacher as needed to hear an interaction.

The Montessori community supports the need for assurance that high quality early childhood programming is being provided for young children. It is our intention that this document be used to demonstrate that high quality and developmentally appropriate practice can be accomplished in a variety of settings and in a variety of ways. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in providing a quality choice for children and families.

This document does not address specific scoring questions and is not intended as a definitive guide in assessing a Montessori classroom using the ECERS-R but rather is intended to demonstrate how the requirements may be aligned with best practice in a high-quality Montessori classroom in North Carolina. For specific questions regarding use of the assessment tool as it relates to Montessori classrooms in NC, contact information and resources can be found at www.ncrlap.org.

Montessori Principles

- Dr. Maria Montessori developed a theory of child development based on scientific inquiry and observation of children from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds over a 50- year period.
- The Montessori system of education was developed based on the observed developmental needs of children.
- A core principle is respect for the child's innate urge to develop toward independence and mastery in the domains of motor, language, cognitive, emotional, and social development.
- The child's primary developmental task is self-construction based on exploration and discovery in a specially prepared environment that provides opportunity to develop coordination, concentration, order, and independence.
- A teacher specially prepared by an accredited Montessori Teacher Preparation Program is crucial to the full implementation of the philosophy, teaching methods, and curriculum.
- A mixed age grouping of children based on developmental need and tasks provides the optimal opportunity to develop in all domains.
- The teacher, as guide or facilitator, provides appropriate opportunities and experiences based on observed developmental readiness of each child with the prepared environment and individual or small group lessons.
- Adults in the classroom use an "up person/down person" approach to supervision. One teacher will give lessons while the other observes the group and maintains the tone through appropriate management of the learning environment.
- Children choose their own material or activity and may work alone or in a small group.
- As the child explores, and experiments with activities and materials, his discovery of concepts is enhanced. This is described as the child's "work" as he engages in self-construction.
- Children develop creativity and problem solving through engagement with real experience rather than "fantasy play" with adult provided props.
- Children may engage with activities, materials, and peers in a variety of ways that meet developmental needs.
- All day Montessori programs have an instructional portion of the day, the "uninterrupted extended work cycle," when children choose their activities, receive lessons as ready, and interact with their peers. During non-instructional portions of the day, materials and activities may be provided that are not observed in the classroom.
- Montessori teachers and children generally use a quiet tone of voice as a way of providing an environment that is not distracting or disruptive.