The Quick Check
Transforming Practice through Teacher-Powered Data

An online innovation in self-study that uses bite-sized data to improve teacher practice and strengthen professional learning models for better child outcomes
THE QUICK CHECK

The Quick Check is an online reflective practice tool that transforms how teachers think about their practices and what is working in their classrooms. Developed by Chris Sciarrino and the team at the Early Learning Lab, it creates thoughtful connections between teacher practices and child outcomes on a weekly basis and helps to sustain the uptake of high-quality teaching practices. It is also easy to integrate into any professional learning toolkit.

This guide is intended to support professional learning providers in co-designing and applying the Quick Check in local contexts. What follows is an overview of the Quick Check, a guide to developing and adapting the tool, a promising case study, and learnings from our on-the-ground experience.

WHAT TEACHERS SAID

“Without the Quick Check I would be more scattered and less intentional on my strategies.”

“I can see children’s behaviors changing over time.”

“I thought it was more time-consuming work added to my already tons of work. But it was all worth it. I have learned so much and continued to grow.”

“I AM DOING IT!”

“It helps me structure in time for reflection which I know I should do, but I don’t always find the time to do it.”

“It helps me focus on myself, use specific practices, helps me see behavior through a consistent lens.”
The reality is that even when professional learning models include the best of what the early childhood field knows about impactful teacher practices, the gains in child outcomes are often small or inconsistent. In short, even the highest quality content training outside the classroom does not always lead to fluency in practice inside the classroom.

A major roadblock is that teachers typically rely on a handful of trainings a year to learn many teaching strategies. Additionally, infrequent child assessment reports provide data that is often broad, ambiguous, and ultimately overwhelming. There is a need for more regularized and clear feedback loops that allow teachers to zero in on a set of strategies that they can apply quickly in the classroom.

At the Early Learning Lab, we saw this first hand as we worked with educators in Oakland, Fresno, and San Jose to improve teacher professional development.

We started brainstorming: How might we reinforce existing professional learning activities to help teachers become fluent in using best practices so that practices actually stick? And how can we shift from using data at the program level for accountability and decision making to data used in the classroom to build teachers’ skillsets, confidence, and creativity?
The Solution: The Quick Check

From there, we developed the Quick Check: a weekly online self-study tool that gives teachers a way to quickly reflect and gauge their effectiveness in using specific practices in the classroom.

As a set of survey questions, the tool provides a light-touch way for teachers to think about and record their teaching practices — what they are doing, not yet doing, or want to try next — on a schedule that works for them. It also reinforces existing professional learning activities and supports teachers in applying them more frequently and consistently without being a burdensome add-on.

We have seen the Quick Check generate positive results as teachers have become highly motivated to learn more about themselves and the children in their classrooms. Teachers have also been eager to share their learnings with each other and have strengthened their collective growth as a community of learners.

A TEACHER’S JOURNEY TO FLUENCY IN PRACTICE

By adding the Quick Check to professional learning toolkits, teachers discover the power of their practices in their classrooms, where they are the expert researchers. The process promotes their self-direction and self-efficacy. By deepening their understanding of practices that create small changes, they become more fluent in applying targeted practices.
3 Steps to Create the Quick Check for Local Contexts

Professional learning resources are more useful and applicable when they are adapted to local contexts and involve the teachers in their design and development. The objective is to make it easy for teachers to dive deep on select practices to build fluency and agility in adapting teaching practices to children’s needs before moving on to learn new practices. The development of the Quick Check is an iterative process of co-design, implementation, and improvement.

1. Co-design

Design the Quick Check with teachers for teachers. The process of co-designing will create better understanding of the tool and reduce barriers to use. The objective is to make it easy for teachers to dive deep on select practices to build fluency before moving on to learn new practices.

Start with existing practice measures to identify a specific focus. Select a small subset of practices that address challenges and/or areas that teachers want to focus on first. Make sure to break them down into what teachers find to be usable chunks of information.
**Recruit a coalition of the willing.** Offer teachers the choice to use the Quick Check. Even a small pilot group will work. Make it clear that this is a tool and process that teachers own and should use only if it supports them in their professional learning.

**Create a prototype Quick Check survey.** The survey should be short (no more than 10 minutes per week), accessible on desktop/mobile, and light on text with dropdown choices. It should focus on agreed-upon priority practices aligned with the professional learning model, and allow for reflection on the prior week and provide a focus for the following week. It should also track desired behaviors over time.

**Conduct user input sessions and refine the survey.** Introduce the initial prototype to teachers and get feedback on the content and the user experience. Use feedback to refine the survey questions and design elements to improve its accuracy and ease of use.

**2. Implement and Road Test**

Use a road test approach to encourage tweaks and creativity along the way. This is a chance to try out shared solutions to inform classroom practice, not a formal study.

**Put processes in place for regular use.** Designate a point person to develop and manage the Quick Check, as well as oversee the weekly flow of communication; i.e., send out the Quick Check at a consistent time each week, follow up with teachers, and make sure current data is accessible to teachers, to ensure an ongoing process that helps teachers become agile in adapting teaching practices to children’s needs.

**Designate time for the road test and feedback.** Schedule time for feedback in consistent intervals that are long enough to get feedback and short enough to ensure a nimble cycle of inquiry to address any roadblocks along the way. We found six-week cycles work well.

**Collect data along the way and provide visuals.** Track answers and usage information. Then, create and share simple data visualizations like run charts, graphs, and tables to demonstrate change by week. Ensure they are easy to understand and can be used for direct application to the classroom. Week-to-week comparison should be the goal. Take advantage of current technologies and supports (e.g., user-friendly online surveys) to help make this process seamless.

**Get teacher feedback during existing scheduled professional learning activities.** If that’s not possible, make it a point to gather feedback via phone, email, or other informal group or individual sessions at each six-week interval. Keep a record of the feedback received and compile it into lessons learned, as well as the next iteration of the Quick Check for the ongoing road test.
3. Reflect and Improve

Synthesize learnings from this cycle to prepare and improve the next iteration of the tool.

**Gather data and synthesize insights.** Ask teachers to reflect on the overall process and learnings. Their voices will have been the strongest force driving this improvement process and they will have many insights to offer. Synthesize learnings from them about how to modify the Quick Check in the next iteration.

**Compare Quick Check with other data.** Analyze end-of-year teaching observation results from validated observation tools, reflect upon anecdotal information, identify trends in Quick Check data, and look at child assessment and additional teacher practice data to see if they support the Quick Check results.

**Record practice insights.** During the road test, reflections will likely lead to tweaks and adjustments to the process and to the actual tool. Use the final data gathered from the Quick Check to demonstrate how reflection is enhancing the teacher experience.

**Act on the group’s recommendations.** Based on both the qualitative and quantitative learnings, brainstorm together on how to improve and iterate the next cycle of the Quick Check.

---

**Case Study: Franklin-McKinley School District**

*How adding the Quick Check to one district’s professional learning model supports weekly reflection on practices that foster young children’s social emotional skills*

The Franklin-McKinley School District in San Jose, California, is aiming to build children’s social emotional skills districtwide. In the 2015–2016 school year, the Early Learning Lab, the district, and partners began to adapt and apply the Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Young Children, an evidence-based teaching practices framework.

The overall professional learning model design had a clear focus in which all activities, such as training, coaching, and professional learning communities, reinforced each other and were built into teachers’ work time. Despite that, teachers expressed frustration with continuing to deal with children’s challenging behaviors, indicating a disconnect between professional learning and direct application of practices in the classroom.
In the 2016-2017 school year, the Early Learning Lab looked for an innovative way to focus the emphasis on specific teacher practices to support the implementation of professional learning. That’s when we developed the Quick Check to keep a laser focus on application of practices in the classroom. Here’s how we co-designed, implemented, and improved the Quick Check in the district.

1. Co-design

During this first stage of development, we crafted 10 questions for input from teachers, coaches, partners, and administrators. A group of teachers from a variety of settings, including district special education and Transitional Kindergarten, California State Preschool Program, and Head Start, opted in to use the Quick Check.

We looked at Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT) pre-observation results and identified three areas of practice we could zoom in on and develop further. The final questions centered on:

- Reinforcing the language and range of the key Pyramid Model practices
- Increasing the scope of those practices used in the classroom
- Building self-confidence and competence in using the practices
- Tracking numbers and types of positive and persistent challenging behaviors of children

In conversations with teachers, we collectively decided that information entered on the Quick Check would be seen only by them and each individual could decide with whom they wanted to share the thoughts they recorded on the Quick Check. We wanted to respect their desire as professionals to solve their own dilemmas in implementation of the Pyramid Model and to give their reflective process a place of its own.

2. Implement and Road Test

On a weekly basis, we sent the Quick Check to a group of seven teachers who opted in to the road test. They used the survey to reflect upon the Pyramid Model practices they used that week and record behaviors they were seeing in the children. We shared simple data visuals for individual teacher reflection and gathered feedback at multiple checkpoints along the way (two group teacher meetings, one administrative meeting, and two one-on-one sessions with each teacher in the group).

We experienced a breakthrough moment in this phase — teachers wanted more data and wanted it more quickly in weekly reports and a summary at the end of each six-week cycle. They wanted to validate for themselves what they felt was changing in their own practices and in children’s behaviors through Quick Check data.

We consider this a success and cannot say enough how refreshing and promising it is to hear, “Can we have more data?” versus “I do not want to talk about data.” The teachers were owning their own data to see what works.
3. Reflect and Improve

During this phase, we looked at information from each six-week cycle throughout the road test and created a summary for the year to identify any trends. As we synthesized data from the first year of Quick Check implementation, we shared run charts of increases in positive behaviors and decreases in challenging behaviors to show progress over time (See chart: Run Chart: Children with Challenging Behaviors Over Time).

From our qualitative observations, we found that frequent self-study using bite-sized data, as an additional support to other professional learning activities, was not only increasing teacher uptake in the target practices but sparking a shift in mindsets. We saw an increase in trust, buy-in, leadership, motivation, and curiosity. Teachers also wanted to keep using the Quick Check.

After Year 1 (2016–17), we noted teacher recommendations for updating the content and usability of the Quick Check in Year 2 (2017–18). For example, they wanted to follow their practices with one child more deeply to see if they could have more impact on that child’s behavior. We added a survey section called “A Closer Look” and made it optional to offer them the choice.

We also recognized that we needed to broaden our baseline data to see the effect of the Quick Check distinct from other professional learning activities. In Year 2, we include validated pre-post teacher observations from all teachers in the district’s professional learning model, not just Quick Check users. At the end of the year, we will be able to see how teachers who use the Quick Check progress compared to those who do not.

Year after year, we are continuing to improve the Quick Check, embed new practices, and expand the group of teachers within the context of the Franklin-McKinley School District to support their fluency in practice.
Insights

Our own experience developing Quick Checks and bringing co-design to early learning has been both challenging and rewarding. Here’s what we’ve learned along the way.

1. **Be brave, jump in:** Allow time to set conditions for success, but start the work; it can and should be adapted as you go. It is critical for a small group of teachers to opt in to build the process and content collaboratively with professional learning staff. The early adopters inform the development within the reality of their day-to-day work, creating functionality that fits. The resulting energy develops leadership, builds a culture of learning, and encourages others to opt in.

2. **Maintain a user focus:** Teacher voice and choice are hallmarks of this approach. If you are asking for input, use it. Be open to creating solutions that address the root of the teachers’ issues, which may not be the same as yours. An authentic focus on, and co-design with, teachers is well worth the effort to create buy-in, ensure the tool continues to be useful, and increase fluency in using high-quality practices.

3. **Find simple pain points to tackle:** Ask teachers: “What do you wish worked better for you and your children?” This will uncover blockers and pain points of implementation. Then co-design a solution to address the results they want and allow them to see progress in quick spurts over time. Short wins and small steps add up to big changes in addressing the pain points.

4. **Keep it relevant to the daily work:** By focusing on concrete action, we create dynamic daily application and uptake of the strategies discussed in professional learning trainings. Self-study prompts in the Quick Check should lead the teacher to become aware of small changes that have been successful and to think about what they would like to try next and can immediately apply in their classrooms. Data from their responses should allow them to experience results of changes in practice in themselves and/or the children, seeing personal evidence of self-efficacy.

5. **Clarify the purpose of the tool:** Clarify for participants that the Quick Check is not an evaluative tool in the sense of program evaluation. It is a learning and improvement tool that the teacher uses to construct his/her own knowledge toward developing skills and mindsets. Unlike annual measurement that focuses on broad programmatic results and the validation of certain interventions, this type of measurement is focused on the small changes the teachers can see in themselves or the children in their classrooms on a weekly basis.

6. **Use an iterative process to sustain gains:** Put the process in place to support ongoing iteration and long-term sustainability. Each time you co-design and try out an innovation, the improvement gears are set in motion and increase the buy-in and knowledge of the user, creating positive impact on the culture of learning. In addition, learning the iterative process helps create a mental map for solving other challenges in teaching practices as they arise.

7. **Leverage technology as a vehicle for scale:** As we consider creative solutions to scale support for adult-child interactions, technology should be part of the conversation to reach more teachers. While we often think of the use of technology as counterintuitive to the development of human interaction, the Quick Check approach actually centers on individual self-reflection and supports human interaction in the classroom.

For more information or for support with developing and adapting the Quick Check for local contexts, contact Chris Sciarrino, Director of Early Childhood Practice and Innovation, at csciarrino@earlylearninglab.org.
Acknowledgements

The Quick Check was made possible thanks to support from the following:

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, funders of Starting Smart and Strong communities including Franklin-McKinley School District

Chris Sciarrino, Director of Early Childhood Practice and Innovation at the Early Learning Lab

Dr. Kelly Campbell, Consultant to the Early Learning Lab from University of California, Berkeley

Dr. Kimberly Boller, Senior Advisor to the Early Learning Lab and Senior Fellow at Mathematica Policy Research

The Pyramid Model Consortium

The Early Learning teachers at the Franklin-McKinley School District

Melinda Waller, Director of Early Learning at Franklin-McKinley School District

Juan Cruz, Superintendent of Franklin-McKinley School District

Dr. Tweety Yates, Consultant/Trainer from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the Pyramid Model Consortium

Christy Yom, Early Learning Coach at Franklin-McKinley School District

Katherine Powell, Early Learning Coach at New Teacher Center