ECE SPOTLIGHT SERIES

BUILD TO LAST: QUALITY ASSURANCE

Supporting learning through monitoring and regulation

Quality early childhood education brings a host of educational and financial benefits to individuals and society. By defining quality in core frameworks, equipping the ECE workforce to meet and enforce quality standards, and capturing data on quality systematically, governments can monitor quality effectively, and continuously improve services so that all children are supported to reach their potential.

Quality in an ECE setting is achieved when there is alignment between the systems, settings, and adults[1] which have the biggest influence on a young child's experience of the setting. When this is the case, children have the opportunity to learn, to develop holistically, and be safe in their ECE environments. Under these circumstances, children, families and society can experience the full social, academic and financial benefits of quality early childhood education over the long term. Holistic discussions about the quality of ECE need to consider a range of factors including curriculum, infrastructure, workforce, families, communities and policies. While all these variables contribute to quality ECE, quality assurance focuses on assessing children's experiences of ECE settings and ensuring they are conducive to child development and learning.

Quality assurance (QA) is the process of promoting quality by ensuring that ECE settings and institutions adhere to a set of standards or guidelines whose explicit aim is to **promote the provision of quality early learning services**. It can involve a range of policies and procedures for collecting, analysing and reporting information on early childhood education settings. Quality assurance systems are necessary to ensure that standards are monitored and enforced, and that data about quality are regularly captured and shared with key stakeholders to inform decision-making and policymaking, and enable real-time improvements to be made in ECE settings.

A well-functioning QA system:

- **boosts children's outcomes** by ensuring that quality is monitored and maintained or improved;
- **generates essential data about the status and quality of ECE services at different levels of the system** and tracks progress towards the agreed quality goals;
- **promotes better services** by setting clear expectations for service delivery among service providers, and facilitating performance evaluation of service delivery in individual settings;
- **makes policy and planning more responsive** by identifying and prioritizing areas for urgent attention and facilitating need-based interventions such as mentoring or targeted professional development at the level of service providers as well as within policy and planning teams;
- **supports good governance** by coordinating reporting and monitoring at different levels of the system and across different providers to create a full picture of services, and to support regulation of the entire system;
- **improves accountability** to key stakeholders such as families and communities, the ECE workforce, and officials within the ministry of education, and other relevant ministries and subnational authorities;
- **stimulates demand** for services among families by elevating the value and impact of early learning services.

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1   This includes parents and caregivers, ECE teachers and workforce, health-care professionals, community workers and leaders, and other adults with whom a child interacts regularly.

Comprehensive standards for quality

The quality of early childhood education is one of the strongest predictors of attainment at age 18. Evidence indicates that poor quality implementation can fail to have positive effects on child development or may even lead to negative effects.[2] It is critical that governments clearly articulate what quality service provision looks like in their context, actively monitor services, and ensure compliance with regulatory quality frameworks.

Quality assurance systems should make it possible for governments to monitor and regulate all providers. Approximately **40 per cent** of ECE provision globally is delivered by a provider other than government such as a private centre, a community centre, non-governmental organization (NGO) or faith-based organization (FBO). Governments can actively steward services to standardize the quality of services. Since the aim of regulating services is to promote quality, strategies to progressively regulate services should consider how providers can be supported to attain quality standards. This reduces the risk that supply is negatively impacted by avoidable closures. In **Georgia**, the law on Early and Preschool Education and Care, adopted in 2016, paved the way for the introduction of new ECE minimum standards across all ECE settings, including privately operated centres which were previously exempt.

The factors which converge to support quality are captured in a set of quality standards. Standards set benchmarks for quality of services, ensure providers have a clear set of expectations so that they can improve services, and create a framework for assessing and monitoring compliance with regulatory requirements.

Since definitions of quality vary from context to context, ensuring a shared understanding of quality can help ensure that quality goals are clear and measurable. In 2021 the Government of Bulgaria began to **operationalize the European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) standards** within the Bulgarian context. Several multi-stakeholder consultations were held in which participants collaborated to create a shared understanding of quality services for children aged 0–7 years. As a result, definitions of quality for 0–3-year-olds have been expanded beyond self-service skills such as dressing and feeding, to include early stimulation and development of holistic skills. Legislative changes have been introduced to ensure that the workforce caring for this age group includes staff with appropriate pedagogical skills to enable centres to meet the expanded definition of quality.

Standards should focus on factors which most influence quality. These factors, referred to as process quality, encompass aspects such teacher–child interactions, the use and delivery of the curriculum through play-based, child-centred and contextually relevant approaches, children's use of materials, and the extent to which all children feel a sense of belonging. Structural factors including staff–child ratios, safety regulations, physical space and hygiene, teachers' qualifications, in-service training and mentorship and availability of materials also influence the quality and accessibility of ECE and should be included in quality assurance efforts.

Quality assurance frameworks should support and encourage meaningful inclusion of all children including children of all genders, linguistic groups, children with disabilities, and children on the move. For example, standards should include the extent to which all children can participate in learning, as well whether attitudes and interactions in the classroom are welcoming of all. Accessibility of physical infrastructure and WASH facilities can also be assessed as part of a broader approach to inclusion.

Eswatini developed the Standards for Inclusive Education in 2019 to support pre-primary, primary, and secondary school communities in advancing inclusion. The standards are designed to be used by school leaders and teachers as self-evaluation tools to inform school improvement, specifically in terms of inclusive education practices. School inspectors may also use them to identify areas in need of further support. The document includes standards and indicators for leadership and management; planning and budgeting; school accessibility; support provision for children with disabilities; curriculum and assessment; professional development for teachers and staff; health and safety; monitoring and evaluation;

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2   Lake, A., & Chan, M., 'Putting science into practice for early child development', *Lancet*, 385(9980), 2015, 1816-1817.

and parent engagement and the school community. **As evidence about ECE practice evolves, definitions of quality may change over time.** Quality frameworks and standards will need to be **updated and reviewed** to ensure they remain relevant and appropriate as evidence about ECE practice evolves. New standards or updates to standards should be established through participatory consultative processes with a range of stakeholders, and tested in a **pilot before scale-up**. **Colombia** adapted the **Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes** (MELQO) learning environment tool MELE to the national context in collaboration with national and international universities. The two-year process allowed the government to pilot the adapted tool in a limited number of districts before applying the test nationally. The tool is still being adapted as the national context evolves. Similarly, in the **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, the Fundamental Quality Standards (FQS) for preschools were field tested to assess whether they were feasible and relevant for the context. The field-testing process involved training teachers on the FQS, conducting assessments of the preschools against the standards, and gathering feedback from stakeholders. The learnings from this field testing are guiding the further roll-out of FQS.

In countries which prioritize integrated ECD, ECE quality frameworks may connect with an overarching, multisectoral approach. In **Jamaica**, the Early Childhood Commission (ECC) is a multi-stakeholder institution established in 2003 to improve the quality of early childhood care education and development. With representation from all key ministries, the executive branch, the opposition political party, non-state actors, and experts in early health and education, the ECC developed standards and regulations to monitor the quality of ECE programmes and has the legislative authority to enforce standards and impose sanctions when required.

Quality assurance standards often have to be adapted when applied in situations of emergency and crisis. To ensure that quality is maintained, standards should focus on core elements which are critical to ensuring that children impacted **by crisis** can benefit from quality ECE support.

North Rhine-Westphalia state in Germany introduced a series of Bridge Projects (BPs) which delivered alternative ECE programmes for refugee communities, **implemented under a flexible regulatory policy**. Minimum standards for the BPs included the requirement for one member of staff to be trained in ECE, supported by volunteers leading to a teacher to pupil ratio of 1:5. Flexibility was offered in relation to standards associated with the curriculum and structural criteria, with BP organizers given autonomy to choose the location, frequency of sessions, and age range of children. A **study** found that these flexible bridge models performed as well as or better than permanent ECE centres when it came to process quality. While not all models were able to provide a comparable experience to a full-time, structured ECE programme, the study concludes that Bridge Projects with adapted standards were a viable initial action to support rapid expansion of quality ECE and services for refugee families in post-resettlement contexts. These projects could begin to mitigate the negative impact of harmful early experiences on young children.

Measuring quality and encouraging compliance

The way quality is measured is determined by the system goals and the type of data required to achieve each goal. For example, one goal may be to ensure that individual ECE settings are safe, effective and know how to improve. Another goal may be to use quality assurance data to support advocacy for additional budget allocation, or to stimulate demand among parents by demonstrating the impact of services. Mechanisms for measuring quality should be appropriate for the task and the goal.

Mechanisms for quality assurance include internal processes and external assessments. Internal processes such as self-assessment can support documentation of quality and encourage reflection on classroom practice. They are likely to be complemented by external assessments and site visits from officials mandated to monitor and report on the quality of individual settings, such as inspectors or district education officers.

An external quality assessment should assess settings against the minimum country-level standards, or if unavailable, against regional or international benchmarks. While structural standards may be straightforward to measure or demonstrate, process quality can be more challenging to measure. **Direct observation** is the best way to assess factors such as teacher–child interactions. To facilitate this process, additional tools, guidelines and training of supervisory authorities may be required.

In **Nigeria**, a classroom observation tool was developed to help School Support Officers to measure quality within ECE classrooms. Developed by the Universal Basic Education Commission and the National Colleges of Education with support from UNICEF, the tool helps ensure that classroom observations are comprehensive, that measures of quality are evenly applied across settings, and that assessments are focused on critical aspects of quality. The tool focuses on teacher preparedness, play-based pedagogy, gender inclusion, language of instruction, teaching and learning materials, and WASH facilities.

Quality assurance can extend to mechanisms to give support, rewards or penalties to service providers based on the extent to which they are meeting established requirements or expectations, with the goal of benefiting children. In **Rwanda**, bronze, silver and gold tiers create a ladder of quality which centres move up as they progressively meet a range of quality standards, with mentoring support to address gaps in quality.

Financial incentives can be effective motivators for quality improvement. In **South Africa**, where the majority of ECE centres are privately owned and regulated by government, centres which are registered and meet quality standards for care and programming are eligible for government subsidies to support their work.

Establishing effective data management systems to capture data on ECE quality, and ensuring their integration within the Education Management Information System (EMIS) or other relevant information system is critical for effective decision-making and strengthening the linkages between pre-primary and primary. Data on the percentage of ECE centres meeting national quality standards, and other relevant measures, can be used in conjunction with disaggregated data. Progressively incorporating individual characteristics such as disability status, gender or location can create a fuller picture of which children have access to quality services. For example, in Kiribati, data on preschool quality standards as well as preschool education administrative data, including enrolment and teacher data, were collected digitally for the first time in 2022. This prepared the way for the integration of ECE into the EMIS. Digitizing this process will give decision makers the data they need to plan for smooth transitions and improve the quality of foundational learning for all children.

"Expanded access cannot come at the expense of diminished quality. Therefore, governments should commit at least twenty five per cent of recurrent pre-primary budgets for non-salary expenditures such as training for teachers, curriculum development, teaching and learning materials and quality assurance mechanisms."

A World Ready to Learn, UNICEF, 2019

Building capacity to monitor and support quality

Effective quality assurance processes are fully integrated into national systems, under the leadership of the ministry of education or other relevant institution, or through an integrated, multisectoral approach to holistic early childhood development. Their success depends on inputs and reflections from a wide range of **stakeholders** key to service delivery in each context. From ECE teachers, caregivers, child development workers and school leaders to inspectors, local and state authorities, M&E specialists, policymakers, and parents, **key personnel** at national and subnational levels should understand how their role supports the measurement and monitoring of quality, and continuous improvement of services. Stakeholders should be capacitated to understand the results generated through QA systems, and to play their role effectively whether their contribution to QA is carried out in ECE settings and schools, in government offices, or in the home and community.

Quality assurance systems which focus on compliance without quality improvement can negatively impact equitable access to services. At the level of ECE settings, quality assurance systems should support individual settings and teachers to improve their practice, and in turn achieve better outcomes for children. **Supportive supervision** practices aim to enhance service delivery through coaching or mentoring provided by inspectors or other designated officials, peer support programmes, or referrals to professional development opportunities.

In some states in **Nigeria**, ECE-specialist School Support Officers (SSO) are responsible for measuring quality, and providing mentoring and support to help teachers improve their practice. To ensure that key stakeholders understand each other's roles in achieving quality play-based learning, SSOs are encouraged to be part of teacher training and school leaders are encouraged to be part of SSO training. Through this process teachers, school leaders and SSOs gain insights into these complementary functions, which can in turn enhance their own contribution to the shared aim of delivering quality services.

For the QA system to keep pace with expanding service provision, there should be sufficient numbers of skilled staff, benefiting from initial training and continuous professional development, who are deployed and resourced appropriately to monitor quality reliably. The financial implications of this should be considered in planning and budgeting activities. By analysing aggregated **data** on ECE delivery, planners and policymakers can better understand how equitably and efficiently the ECE sector is working, and can be responsive to challenges. To ensure that data about quality reaches the intended audience, strong coordination is required at all levels. Data collection and reporting should be accurate and timely. Data analysis should feed into key parts of the planning cycle such as annual and midterm reviews, and budget preparation. Data should be relevant to these decision makers, and available at local or municipal, regional and national level.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, several countries have created provision for **devolved decision-making**. In Chile, the Chile Crece Contigo programme has coordinated the governance of ECE vertically. As a result, each governance level from national to local has institutions tasked with supervision and support, planning, and budgeting, among others. In Peru local participatory budgeting empowers local decision makers to allocate funding to improve ECE quality based on contextual realities. The model has brought some benefits, but there is a disproportionate allocation of budget to physical infrastructure in some districts. This underscores the need for policies of devolution to be coupled with capacity-building in relation to key determinants of quality.

Data on ECE quality should be made available to parents and caregivers, in a language and format they understand, to support transparency and accountability of government for regulating services. Ensuring the availability of feedback loops for parents and caregivers also supports accountability and transparency.

Quality assurance systems are dynamic and should continue to evolve as the context shifts, and as the evidence base around ECE, and quality assurance for ECE continues to expand. For example, as **evidence about inclusive ECE** expands, quality assurance systems should adapt to accommodate this. Gaps in existing evidence which may be addressed in future include the impact of implementing quality assurance mechanisms on both process quality and child-level outcomes, and the most effective standards to use in a variety of national and subnational contexts[3], including in humanitarian and post-resettlement contexts.

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3   UNICEF and UNICEF Innocenti. Forthcoming evidence review on what works to advance pre-primary education in low- and middle-income countries.

Progressively developing QA systems

Whether their <u>quality assurance systems</u> are well established or still being developed, governments can take the following steps to establish or refine quality assurance for ECE:

✓ Integrate planning for QA into the education planning cycle, reflecting its importance as a core function of the ECE system.
Advocacy with key stakeholders within the ministry of education at national and subnational levels, and with other relevant agencies, and stakeholders more broadly can support the progressive institutionalization of QA.

✓ Develop or revisit standards and QA mechanisms to ensure they reflect current goals and approaches within the ECE sector and use appropriate technology.
For example, existing standards may need to be updated to reflect the adoption of play-based learning and a renewed emphasis on inclusion. The introduction of digital data-collection tools and expansion of EMIS may present the opportunity to update QA data collection, analysis and reporting mechanisms.

✓ Ensure tools and mechanisms are appropriate to the task.
For example, use multi-stakeholder dialogue to assess whether external and internal assessments are aligned with overarching systems goals, and whether mechanisms to incentivize and enforce compliance are appropriate and effective.

✓ Strengthen capacity to monitor ECE.
For example, consider whether roles and responsibilities are clear, competencies are sufficiently developed, budgets support core activities, and monitoring is coordinated.

✓ Position monitoring as a first step towards quality improvement.
For example, reflect on whether the right tools and supports are in place to support quality improvement within settings, as well as at a system level.

UNICEF advocates for inclusive access to quality ECE for all children. For further details, please see programme briefs on gender, disability inclusion, and ECE in emergencies.

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for every child