



Photo Credit: Maya Soonarane, ECE classroom in Mauritius

RESEARCH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Policy Brief | April 2021

Guide on Early Childhood Education Quality Assurance Systems for Africa

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Key Messages

- Quality assurance in early childhood education (ECE) is pivotal in ensuring that children in ECE programs have an experience that helps them develop and learn. This includes the quality of the interactions among children and teachers and the quality of the policies, regulations, and resources provided to the ECE programs.
- Governments should assume responsibility for the quality of care children receive, regardless of whether they are enrolled in public or private ECE programs.
- When designing a quality assurance system, it is important to clearly define the purpose of the system and use service quality standards to define what good quality looks like in a county context.
- Governments must decide how to structure their quality assurance systems, what types of measurement tools to use, how the results will be used, and how to provide professional development to help teachers and administrators improve their practice. It is also important to consider sustainability and how the programs can help improve equity by reaching the most marginalized children.

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) has expanded across the African continent over the decades (Mwamwenda, 2014) and it is featured prominently in the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25). For children to reap the benefits of ECE, it must be of sufficient quality:

- **Quality** in ECE does not have a universal definition. It is specific to the context, country, and culture. However, some common elements of quality can be thought of in two dimensions—process quality and structural quality.
- **Process quality** relates to the quality of interactions between children and their teachers and their peers. **Structural quality** comprises the laws, policies, regulations, and other influences that originate outside of the classroom but affect process quality. These structural supports help set the stage for interactions between teachers and children (Cryer et al., 1999; Raikes et al., 2019).
- **Quality assurance** is the process of monitoring ECE settings to assess and ensure the quality of children’s experiences. (Raikes et al., 2019). This is typically undertaken by governments, either at national or sub-national levels. To monitor the quality of ECE programs, a government must first set *standards*.
- **Service quality standards** are government guidelines on the practices and experiences children should be exposed to in ECE settings. Other standards, such as standards for staff (including what types of education and training they require) and curricula (the expectations for what children learn), are related, but different

from service quality standards (Raikes et al., 2019).

While quality assurance requires measurement, not all measurement of ECE is quality assurance. There are many efforts to measure ECE quality and child outcomes for research or project impact evaluations. While these efforts can help design policies, they are not covered in this brief. We focus here on how governments can use quality assurance systems to improve the quality of all ECE programs and support children’s development and learning.

Quality assurance systems are typically led by governments, given the diversity of provision of ECE programs, which can be private, publicly funded, community-based, or a civil-society provision. Education is a universal right and public good—therefore, it is the government’s responsibility to ensure all of its children have access to quality ECE experiences, regardless of whether they attend a public or private program.

Global trends in quality assurance systems

Systems to monitor children’s learning environments are common in high-income countries (Anderson et al., 2017), but we have little information on the status of monitoring systems in low- and middle-income countries. Across low- and middle-income countries, inputs like the number of students enrolled, square meters per child, and pupil-teacher ratios are often the only standards measured. There is limited information on how African countries monitor the quality of their ECE services. One study on ECE in Southern Africa suggests that quality assurance is challenged by the high proportion of ECE programs operated by the private sector, lack of training of government officials in ECE, limited education and training of the ECE workforce, poor remuneration, and a lack of standards,

indicators, and regulatory guidance (Thwala, 2014). The study further finds that there is unclear guidance in many countries under whose authority ECE programs are regulated, and teacher training programs and universities are important yet underutilized partners in ECE quality assurance.

Defining the purpose of your ECE quality assurance system

The first step in setting up a quality assurance system is defining the purpose. This is the 'mission statement' that describes what you want to achieve with the system. For example, your purpose may be "to ensure a minimum level of quality across all kindergartens (public, private and Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)), while at the same time monitoring and encouraging providers to improve their quality beyond the minimum level over time." (World Bank, 2021). The purpose may already be set out in government policies, so it is good to review and clarify what already exists. How will the standards be used? Will they be a tool for accountability, registration or licensing, promote self-reflection and improvement, aid parents in decision-making, or some other purpose? (Raikes et al., 2019).

It is important to involve all stakeholders early and often in the process of designing your system. The purpose needs to be acceptable to teachers, headteachers, ECE managers, parents, government officials, private childcare operators, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and anyone else who will be affected by the system. It may take some time to convince everyone of the importance of early childhood development, build trust, and create a process for using their feedback to improve your system design. This extra effort will pay off when the system is launched and the support from the community and stakeholders is already built in.

What is quality ECE in your country? Developing service quality standards

"Program quality standards, if implemented consistently, can 'level the playing field' by ensuring all children benefit from a consistent quality of education." (Aboud & Proulx, 2019). After defining the purpose, there are several other decisions a government will need to make when developing service quality standards (Raikes et al., 2019):

- Should the standards be aspirational and describe the ideal early learning environment, or should they describe basic, minimum levels necessary to protect children's well-being without attempting to reach the level of quality that would be necessary to promote child development? Some countries have included both minimum standards and aspirations for higher-quality provision in their national standards. Given that countries are at different stages of developing and implementing standards, it is desirable to be forward-looking and have a mix of both structural quality and process quality standards.
- Who should be involved in drafting the quality standards? Is there a consultation or steering group? How will teachers, headteachers, ECE managers, and parents be involved in deciding the content and structure of the standards? Will the standards be widely disseminated, and, if so, how?
- How will you know the standards are valid? Will you use statistical comparisons to examine the association between the standards and assessments of children's development? Or will you determine validity through feedback from parents, teachers, and service providers? What type of monitoring system will be set up to

provide feedback on both process and structural quality?

- Will parents be informed of how the programs they are seeking for their children meet the service standards? If so, how will they get this information, and what guidance will be offered in interpreting the information?
- How often will the standards be reviewed or updated, and how will you gather feedback to do this? Who will be responsible for reflecting on the effectiveness of the standards in improving child development?

While there is no global consensus on minimum standards for ECE programs, several countries have developed minimum standards. Rwanda, for example, has a very comprehensive list of standards that cover health, nutrition, staff characteristics and relationships, materials and toys, physical environment, parent engagement, and management (Rwanda Ministry of Gender and Family Promotions, 2016).

Design choices for an ECE quality assurance system

There is no one right way to develop a quality assurance system for ECE. There are, however, several design choices that a country should consider. Some of those choices are described in Table I on the following page, along with key questions and resources that elaborate the options further.

Table 1. Design choices for an ECE quality assurance system

Design Choice	Description	Key Questions	Resources
Structure	How the quality assurance system will be organized and who will operate it	<p>Within which agency does the quality assurance system reside?</p> <p>What is the profile of the staff? What are their roles and responsibilities? Who is doing the inspections? How are we ensuring non-state providers are included in the structure?</p>	<p>Setting up and developing the quality assurance agency: TEMPUS Module 4. UNESCO, 2014.</p>
Types of ECE programs	To which age groups and ECE levels will the system apply	Should you start small and only focus on one or two years of ECE? Or should the system apply to the early grades and younger years as well? If there is an existing quality assurance system for primary education, how can the ECE system be integrated?	<p>Quality Standards and Quality Assurance Systems for Pre-Primary Education. Raikes, A., Neumann, M. and Burton, A., 2019.</p>
Measurement tools	How the quality of services will be measured	Do we have a suitable monitoring tool that covers multiple dimensions of quality?	<p>Measuring the quality of early learning programs. World Bank Early Learning Partnership, 2016.</p>
Reaching the most marginalized children	How the system works to improve equity in ECE	How do we support both private and public providers? How are services for children with disabilities incorporated into the system? Are programs for internally displaced and refugee children part of our system? How do we ensure gender equity through our system?	<p>Gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education. VVOB and FAWE, 2019.</p> <p>Resilience in the Face of Uncertainty: New Research on Early Childhood Services for Refugee Children and Families. (Blog and accompanying reports) RTI and Moving Minds Alliance, 2020</p>
Professional development and training	How the system supports ECE providers and teachers to improve quality based on the findings	Do we provide incentives or rewards to ECE providers who meet the standards? Do we provide extra professional development to those who are not meeting them?	<p>Teacher Support and Motivation Framework for Africa: Emerging Patterns. UNESCO IICBA, 2017.(Part V)</p>
Resources, motivations and incentives	How we resource, motivate, and incentivize the ECE workforce to meet the standards	What are the benefits of meeting the standards? What are the consequences if they are not met? Should we use an accreditation or inspection approach? What resources are available to ECE providers not meeting the standards?	<p>Quality Standards and Quality Assurance Systems for Pre-Primary Education. Raikes, A., Neumann, M. and Burton, A., 2019.</p>

Ongoing program management and sustainability

Quality assurance systems can only be effective if built into the national ECE system and done consistently. Doing a one-time audit of ECE quality can inform policy but does not provide a platform for individual ECE programs to improve. There are several strategies to help a quality assurance program become sustainable:

1. **Political sustainability:** While getting the minister's endorsement is important in launching an ECE quality assurance system, a longer-term strategy is needed to sustain the program through political cycles. One way to improve political sustainability is by showing that the system works. If there is data that the quality of ECE programs is improving among programs participating in the quality assurance system, this data can be used to advocate for continuing support.
2. **Institutional sustainability:** Housing the quality assurance system in an adequately resourced government agency that receives attention from ministry leadership is a way to ensure the system's longevity. For example, locating it within the quality assurance directorate for basic education may be a sustainable choice, as there is already a permanent department focused on improving school quality.
3. **Budget sustainability:** The quality assurance system may be supplemented with outside funding initially but including it in the ministry's budget is a good way to ensure its continuation after donor funding ceases. One strategy is to integrate the quality assurance system into the education sector planning process. The [ECE Accelerator](#) toolkit (UNICEF, 2021) contains ample resources on how to mainstream ECE into education sector analyses, plans, and grant budgets.

Conclusion

This brief provides some considerations for developing a quality assurance system for ECE. It does not guide the exact design choices a country should make in developing its quality assurance system, as there is little evidence that one approach is better than another. As a next step for Together for Early Childhood Evidence and ADEA, we plan to canvass the region for examples of ECE quality assurance systems to share in subsequent publications. Systematic efforts are needed to examine how quality assurance systems improve the quality of ECE services, and more research is needed in this area. As more African countries design and implement quality assurance systems, there will be more opportunities for research, and subsequently, new evidence on good practices in the region.

Further reading

1. [Quality Standards and Quality Assurance Systems for Pre-Primary Education](#). Raikes, A., Neumann, M. and Burton, A., 2019.

This white paper describes key considerations for developing quality standards and quality assurance systems and contains examples from low- and middle-income countries. Annex 2 contains a comprehensive list of steps to consider in building quality assurance systems.

2. [Caribbean Early Childhood Development Good Practice Guide](#). Caribbean Development Bank and UNICEF, 2018.

The *Caribbean Early Childhood Development Good Practice Guide* is designed to assist policymakers, planners, officers, and practitioners in the field to design and deliver good quality care and learning experiences for children in their countries. It contains sections on designing policies and standards for ECE and includes examples of minimum standards.

3. [Regional Guidelines for Developing Policy, Regulation and Standards in Early Childhood Development](#). CARICOM, 2008.

These guidelines from the Caribbean provide practical guidance to early childhood policymakers who are responsible for delivering ECE experiences for the children in their countries. They focus on how to develop policies and standards for the educational and development aspects of the early childhood experience in preschool and childcare settings.

4. [Strengthening Early Childhood Care and Education: A KIX Discussion Paper](#). Aboud, F. and Proulx, K., 2019.

Chapter 5 of this discussion paper includes a review of global public goods, knowledge products, and innovations to improve ECE practice, including around quality assurance.

5. [Teacher Support and Motivation Framework for Africa: Emerging Patterns](#). UNESCO IICBA, 2017.

Part V describes six approaches to overcoming the teacher motivation crisis in Africa—social dialogue, remuneration and incentives, teacher professional development/support, appraisal and evaluation, school improvement/community involvement, and voice, support, and rewards.

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Suggested Citation

Anderson, K., & Soonarane, M. (2021). *Guide on ECE quality assurance systems for Africa* [Policy brief]. Washington, DC: Research Technical Assistance Center.

Acknowledgments

This policy brief was inspired and informed by conversations with the Together for Early Childhood Evidence Consortium and benefitted from reviews and input by Abbie Raikes, Rebecca Sayre, Jem Heinzl-Nelson, and Anna Pettee.



The Research Technical Assistance Center (RTAC) is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of contract no. 7200AA18R00023. This brief was produced by Unbounded Associates and the ECD Measure Group at University of Nebraska Medical Center. The contents are the sole responsibility of RTAC and NORC at the University of Chicago, and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

The RTAC is a network of academic researchers generating timely research for USAID to promote evidence-based policies and programs. The project is led by NORC at the University of Chicago in partnership with Arizona State University, Centro de Investigación de la Universidad del Pacífico (Lima, Peru), Davis Management Group, the DevLab@Duke University, Forum One, the Institute of International Education, the Notre Dame Pulte Institute for Global Development, Population Reference Bureau, the Resilient Africa Network at Makerere University (Kampala, Uganda), the United Negro College Fund, the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.