

Defining, monitoring and improving quality

Guidelines for stronger quality assurance systems in early childhood education

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Design by Paula Lopez

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I. Introduction

Many countries are investing in pre-primary education as a pathway for promoting equity in education and addressing the broader learning crisis. For the great promise of early childhood education (ECE) to be fulfilled, a high level of quality needs to be achieved across all programmes. This is especially vital in the complicated landscape of pre-primary services, which often features multiple service providers, a wide range of programme models and tiered oversight by central, district and/or local levels of government.

Governments have a key accountability to ensuring that all children have opportunities to participate in quality pre-primary education programmes, regardless of how these programmes are delivered or financed. And robust quality assurance systems are a crucial part of building or enhancing a pre-primary subsector that is able to deliver quality services, where relevant, and ensure quality across providers.

How does quality assurance benefit children?

It boosts children's outcomes.

As quality has a powerful impact on the gains children make during their participation in pre-primary education, increased access alone is not enough to ensure that children's outcomes will improve.¹ Systematic quality assurance is the key to monitoring and safeguarding the quality of pre-primary programmes.

It generates valuable data.

The quality assurance system allows governments to analyse and use data to improve their pre-primary subsector. It provides knowledge, including to other stakeholders, about the status and quality of pre-primary services and about progress towards the agreed quality goals.

It serves multiple purposes in promoting better services.

Quality assurance can be used to improve accountability, manage and enhance programme performance, help parents choose which pre-primary option is best for their child and make policies more responsive to children's needs in the national and local context.²

It makes it possible to coordinate monitoring functions and regulate providers effectively.

Pre-primary education services operate under a great diversity of settings, providers, schedules and programme approaches. This diversity can increase the complexity of oversight and quality improvement and is a pivotal factor in the context of decentralization, where monitoring needs to be coordinated between the national and subnational levels.

Defining quality and quality assurance

Quality is not a stand-alone entity of education for young children, but the sum of many interlinked components, including teachers, families and communities, planning and use of resources, and a curriculum designed to help children learn and grow to their full potential.

In the context of pre-primary education, quality can be thought of as the sum of day-to-day experiences and interactions that have the most immediate influence on children. It can be measured by how well the learning environment supports children in gaining the knowledge and skills to develop intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally.

Quality assurance systems are generally designed to promote quality by ensuring that providers adhere to a set of standards. This can involve a range of policies and procedures for collecting, analysing and reporting information on pre-primary settings. It can also extend to mechanisms to provide 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.

What is the purpose of these guidelines?

The guidelines offer a source of fresh ideas and spark deeper understanding as they highlight options and avenues governments can take to assure quality. Based on a literature review of quality in ECE and quality assurance systems,³ the challenges that countries commonly face are discussed, along with principles and considerations to address such challenges. The guidelines can be used to:

- **articulate the elements of an effective quality assurance system;**
- **assess the strengths and areas for improvement within an existing system;**
- **inform plans and action for constructing or further developing quality assurance systems.**

Who will find this content useful?

The guidelines are designed to be used by technical and managerial staff within the ministries of education that are responsible for ECE, monitoring, quality assurance and/or planning. The content will also offer valuable insights to staff in other ministries engaged in financing and/or implementing pre-primary education programmes. UNICEF staff and technical partners responsible for advising governments on ECE monitoring and quality assurance, and those who work in implementing organizations, form another primary audience. All of these people and many more are invited to read, share and use these guidelines in their work to bolster quality in ECE.

What comes next?

As countries develop or enhance their quality assurance systems, they will benefit by first considering their specific context for ECE. This involves identifying the degree of decentralization of responsibility for preschool services, the mix of public and private providers and the existing philosophy and practices related to data collection and monitoring in the education and social sectors. The options a government selects will also be framed according to its institutional, technical and financial capacities to develop and sustain a quality assurance system for the pre-primary subsector.

While most documented country experiences comes from higher-income contexts, the guidelines recognize that challenges will be different depending on a country's available resources. Inherently limited national resources or a lack of resources dedicated to ECE will fundamentally constrict the options for expanding access and addressing any weaknesses in the quality of pre-primary services.

Common challenges with the ECE subsector in low and lower-middle-income countries



Large private sector. It may be challenging to bring a large under-regulated or unregulated private sector into the quality assurance umbrella without strong incentives or enforcement mechanisms, including sufficient staff to monitor private providers.



Lack of clear service quality standards. Standards for monitoring may not be developed, or if they are developed, they may be too broad or too burdensome for monitors to use effectively.



Limited capacity to monitor. Inspectors may not be employed, and if there are inspectors, they may not have received training to look beyond minimum health and safety requirements, or they have limited time and resources to inspect each site. It can be particularly challenging to make regular monitoring visits to rural and remote areas.



Low levels of professionalism. Many preschools in low- and lower-middle-income countries are staffed with community volunteers and paraprofessionals who might not have sufficient training or experience in self-evaluation, or will need additional support to address the issues identified through monitoring. In countries that require higher qualifications and training for preschool staff, the rate of compensation may be lower than for other levels in the education system; this can lead to high turnover and make it difficult to secure continuity in understanding and applying the quality standards.

The suggestions offered in the next section take these challenges into account and acknowledge the diverse contexts in which quality assurance systems are being established or reformed.



II. Defining the elements: Goals, standards, scope, monitoring mechanisms

When designing or improving quality assurance systems for ECE, the process can be guided by focusing on four key elements detailed in this section: the purpose and primary goals, clearly written quality standards, the scope of implementation, and monitoring mechanisms. These elements reflect the common issues and challenges that governments face, and help stakeholders think through the options for addressing them. Many countries have already made, or have partly addressed, some of the important decisions for building their quality assurance systems. Defining the four elements will stimulate reflection on how to ensure the most comprehensive approach for your country, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Key elements to be defined for effective quality assurance systems



A. Purpose and primary goals

Key question:

What purpose and primary goals do you have for the ECE quality assurance system in the context of your country?

Why is this important?

Pinpointing the purpose and goals for the quality assurance system brings clarity to the next steps of defining and building the system. This is a prime opportunity for aligning the expectations of all key stakeholders in the ECE sector. While it may be difficult to balance different viewpoints, expressing clear goals for the system can ensure that they are consistently considered when the other elements of quality assurance are addressed.

In all cases, the quality assurance system should recognize the specific elements of quality that define ECE, rather than being a downward extension of quality assurance for primary education.

What options are a good fit?

Each country might have different goals for developing quality assurance systems, but some of the commonly outlined goals are noted below.⁴

Secure accountability for government funds.

By regularly monitoring pre-primary settings and services, governments can hold service providers responsible for meeting basic standards of health and safety, curriculum implementation and workforce qualifications and practices. The focus is on identifying providers who do not meet basic levels of quality, and issuing warnings, violations or fines.

Manage and improve the performance of ECE programmes.

Quality assurance systems support internal performance management for staff and administrators by encouraging them to reflect individually or as a team on areas of strength and weakness in the pre-primary setting. The feedback can be used to target follow-up support, such as training and materials, to reach the settings and staff who need it most. In turn, this can lead to better classroom practices and improved service delivery.

Inform policy discussions and reforms.

By tracking changes in service quality over time, monitoring data can provide information at both the settings and systems level, which can be used to inform the development and revision of standards, curricula and teacher training.

Inform parental choice.

In market-based systems, which tend to have mixed public and private delivery with limited government oversight, making external quality assessments and ratings available to parents can help them choose the best preschool option for their children.

Ask these questions to determine the purpose and primary goals for quality assurance:

- What are the policy and programme goals for the ECE system over the next five years? What role will the quality assurance system play in achieving these goals?
- Will the focus be on self-assessment, accountability or a combination of both? If a quality assurance system is in place, what does it focus on and should it be adjusted?
- What type of advocacy will be required to make quality assurance a priority for all ECE stakeholders across all levels?

Consider these points when defining the overall purpose and goals.

- **Determining** the primary purpose and goals of the quality assurance system will have a strong impact on how it is designed, including who should conduct monitoring, what types of data are gathered and who has access to these data.
- **This also has implications** for the monitoring methods and tools that are developed. For example, if the purpose of the system is primarily focused on quality improvement, qualitative or self-assessments may be a viable method for monitoring. If the purpose is primarily accountability, other types of measures may be more appropriate. These intentions need to be explicitly defined and stated as a central goal of the system.
- **It is important to ensure** that the purpose is aligned with expectations of all key stakeholders within the system. Even in the context of larger influences such as culture and political climate, joint purposes for accountability and improvement can be integrated into a well-functioning quality assurance system.

Is performance management fully integrated?

When a quality assurance system has a combination of goals, there may be tensions between *monitoring for accountability*, which often entails consequences for staff and services, and *monitoring for performance management*, which emphasize open reflection on areas of weakness. It is therefore important for countries to balance the need for quality assurance systems to exert control through external monitoring with the desire to support participation and cooperation of service providers through monitoring processes.

Goals are not mutually exclusive, and it is common for countries to monitor quality to serve a variety of purposes. Ideally, any combination of goals would include performance management to promote quality improvement, with the view to support decision-making about:

- **staff support and professional development;**
- **corrective actions or sanctions;**
- **adjustments to curricula and pedagogy;**
- **funding or changes to policy.**

Several key actions that can enable the realization of monitoring for performance management and quality improvement are described below.



Develop tools to facilitate quality improvement and provide practitioners with detailed feedback after monitoring/inspection. These tools should also promote opportunities for reflection and discussion among preschool staff, and can foster communities of practice for knowledge exchange and support.



Establish feedback loops to acknowledge or reward progress towards higher levels of quality or 'effectiveness factors',⁵ and to set in motion quality improvement plans for low-performing service providers.



Create strong links between ECE settings, technical specialists and higher education institutions to support pre-primary personnel by reviewing the results of quality assurance processes and providing ongoing guidance with a focus on improving practices.



Foster collaboration between ministries of education and teacher-training institutions to develop approaches to quality improvement that integrate training and professional development. This is critical because in-service teachers as well as prospective teachers will need to receive training in quality assurance.



Promote data accessibility for all levels of decision makers within the pre-primary subsector to inform: micro-level (local) operational decisions on pre-primary activities, often at the district and programme levels; intermediate-level (subregional) management decisions on the allocation and control of resources; and macro-level (central/national) strategic planning decisions, such as the vision for pre-primary services, and medium- and long-term policy objectives and standards.



Bridge monitoring and practical support for quality improvement efforts, including links to professional development opportunities. Exploring various types of support for continuous reflection and improvement can help address the balance between monitoring for control/accountability and monitoring for development/improvement.



Ensure transparency by sharing data/monitoring results with the public and establishing mechanisms to coordinate the flow of data across all levels of government to provide a broad picture of quality.

Ask these questions when reflecting on performance management and quality improvement:

- Does the system balance monitoring for control/accountability and monitoring for development/improvement? Does it establish processes to reward services that demonstrate quality achievements or improved performance, as well as negative consequences for preschools that fail to meet standards within a reasonable time frame?
- Are participants comfortable reflecting critically on service quality, including areas for improvement, without fearing negative consequences?
- Do practitioners receive guidance from managers, peers, pedagogic counsellors or others on how to use monitoring data to develop a plan for improving their practice? Are sufficient resources available to implement that plan and reflect on continuous improvement?



B. Clearly defined quality standards

Key question

What standards exist or are needed to ensure quality in ECE services?

Why is this important?

Standards form the basis for quality assurance. Without clear, comprehensive and measurable standards, quality assurance systems run the risk of focusing on elements that are easily observable but not necessarily most important for young children.

Defining the quality standards establishes the broader quality goals for the pre-primary subsector and are at the heart of quality assurance processes, ideally for all providers. For ECE professionals, families and governments alike, standards are essential for defining what quality in ECE looks like. Standards are intended to point towards higher levels of quality and therefore set forth a country's aspirations for quality.

Once standards are written ...

It is essential that all stakeholders in the system – teachers, school and programme directors, parents, teacher-training institutions, non-governmental organizations and ministry officials – are well informed about the standards and have access to them.

This includes investing in widespread dissemination and translating the standards into all the languages used in the country's ECE programmes.

What options are a good fit?

While some countries have already developed quality standards, these standards may be too broad or too onerous to monitor and/or enforce. Other countries do not have quality standards in place yet and are embarking on the task of developing them. The following suggestions can be applied as appropriate to the specific country context.

1.

If no quality standards exist,

the main task is to map out a process for developing them, ideally in partnership with teacher training institutions, government stakeholders, community and other important contributors to ECE in the country. A stakeholder group involving different viewpoints can be established for this purpose.

This task is founded on an agreed definition of 'quality'. Definitions of quality are contextually and culturally bound, and do not necessarily stay the same over time. While there is no single definition of quality in pre-primary settings, collaborative design is an important part of the process, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered in the definition of quality underpinning the quality assurance standards.

Ideally, this will include all representatives from government agencies with responsibility for early childhood development (health, nutrition and social protection) and stakeholders who could be influential in how standards are developed or used, such as academics, unions, advocacy groups, teachers and parents.

If the technical expertise for development or improvement of quality standards is not available at the national level, consider engaging international experts, local education groups and relevant partners for technical assistance.

Ask these questions as a starting point to define quality in a new system:

- Are there existing ECE programmes with a set of quality standards that can be adapted? Are definitions of quality available in research, government documents or other reports?
- Are the global constructs in existing quality frameworks relevant to your country? For example, how does the stakeholder group define 'play-based' learning as part of effective teaching practices?
- What are the key strengths and areas for improvement within ECE settings? Where would the standards have the most positive impact – by setting a minimum, by outlining aspirational goals, or a combination?

2.

If there are quality standards,

both the service standards and quality assurance system need to be reviewed, evaluated and modified regularly to take into account practical implementation experience and new research (e.g., associations between quality and child development, qualitative work on perceptions among teachers, parents and other stakeholders).

The critical task is to examine the existing standards in terms of their clarity and comprehensiveness and, if necessary, revise them accordingly.

The examination of existing quality standards will reveal key gaps and challenges that need to be addressed. Different processes/mechanisms can be employed to address the challenges. For example, a stakeholder group, including teachers and families, could conduct the examination; a technical working group could be established to develop a road map for revising and disseminating the standards; or external expertise/resources could be engaged to provide technical support.

Ask these questions to help articulate your country's process for revising the standards:

- Are the standards written in clearly understandable language? Were they developed in a transparent and inclusive manner to reflect a range of viewpoints from ECE stakeholders?
- Do the standards include multiple aspects of quality, such as structural and process features?
- Are the standards measurable and monitored regularly? Are they applicable and enforceable across all pre-primary providers?
- Are they used in developing training programmes for staff and those who support/supervise them?
- What are the most effective ways to inform stakeholders (families, teachers, etc.) about the quality standards? Do they offer translations into local languages or versions for those who are less literate?



Consider these points when defining or reviewing the content of quality standards.

- **Quality standards should be comprehensive and evidence-based.** They should reflect new developments in the science of child development. Their broad scope should include multiple dimensions of ECE environments and a holistic view of child development that considers health, nutrition and parenting.
- **Account for both structural and process quality.** Structural quality includes building standards, staff-child ratios, physical space, hygiene, availability of materials and teacher qualifications, while process quality includes teacher-child interactions, children's use of materials and other indicators of how children spend their time at the setting.
- **Ensure intentional and clear alignment of quality standards with staff standards and preschool curriculum standards.** For example, if quality standards include reference to teacher-child interactions, it may be essential to include pre-service training in pedagogy as part of staff standards and ensure that curricular standards leave room for emphasis on teacher-child interactions as well as outlining expectations for topics to be covered.
- **Create well-defined and measurable standards.** They should clarify whether they are intended to serve as a minimum floor for quality or to set aspirational goals, and whether a 'step' system to bridge between existing practices and desired practices would be helpful. Standards should be measurable and not too broad or onerous for preschools to attain.
- **Design the standards with monitoring in mind.** Standards are only useful if they are applied. If standards are vague or have too much detail to easily translate into monitoring tools, it may be difficult for teachers, trainers, supervisors or inspectors to use them to assess and improve quality. Identifying the purposes of monitoring (accountability, improvement) as standards are being developed can help ensure they are used in the manner intended. Ideally, those working on standards and monitoring could work together to build a coherent and feasible approach.



C. Scope of implementation

Key questions

Aside from the government, who are the other ECE providers in your context?

Will all of them be covered by the quality assurance system?

Why is this important?

To reach goals supporting all children's development, quality ECE is ideally assured across all types of ECE settings. This is a key role for governments to play and develop capacity for. In many countries, there are several types of programmes and providers, ranging from formal school-based education to informal home-based settings or childcare that may not have an intentional educational focus but serves many children.

In some countries, many ECE providers may not be registered within the existing system, and the lack of engagement with the system can substantially slow the process of ensuring high quality.

A robust quality assurance system can help clarify the characteristics of high-quality settings and serve as the basis for monitoring and improving quality over time, for both public and private settings. It can also act as an enabling instrument for regulating the registration/ licensing of early childhood services to operate across all settings. In the absence of quality assurance systems, there are no other institutional mechanisms to ensure that all settings protect children's learning, health and safety.

An initial analysis can inform the country's decision on the scope of the quality assurance system and help determine the option that is most appropriate and feasible, by mapping the diverse types of programmes, the number and location of each type and what type of setting children attend most frequently.

If many children are in one or two types of ECE programmes/ settings, it might be appropriate to cover them in the quality assurance system first – with the goal of progressively expanding the scope to reach all types of providers as the system matures. An advantage to this approach is that focusing on a few types of ECE programmes/settings would reduce the complexity of the system. A disadvantage is that the system should ideally reach all providers, and it can be more difficult to expand later if all types of ECE are not considered from the start.

What options are a good fit?

Countries are likely to design and implement a quality assurance system that focuses on one of two options:

1.

The system covers primarily public (government) providers.

Elements to consider when designing and implementing a quality assurance system for this option include:

- developing a set of processes of recognition and accreditation and training relevant government officials on these processes and tools;
- developing grades/stages within the accreditation structure and incentive system for preschools as they move from one stage to the other.

2.

The scope is expanded to cover additional providers.

Providers could include, for example, private, community-based, home-based, and non-governmental or faith-based organizations. Elements to consider when designing and implementing a quality assurance system for this option include:

- developing common procedures for accreditation of public and private preschools and tracking compliance;
- forming partnerships with private sector professionals and preschool managements and networks and involving them in the development of the registration, recognition, accreditation processes and tools, incentive structure as well as review and feedback process;
- giving central agencies on early childhood the capacity to provide focused technical guidance on the implementation of standards. Establishing a council at the central level ensures a well-coordinated approach to quality assurance.

Consider these steps when defining the scope of implementation.

- **Conduct analyses** of existing groups of providers and how they fit into the system to help clarify the structure that is required to reach all providers.
- **Identify groups** of providers who are not engaged with the system at all – either through registration or another means – to help clarify which providers should be covered by the quality assurance system and what steps must be taken to engage such providers.
- **If little data on types of ECE are available**, consider conducting a survey or some other way of quantifying the number and characteristics of the types of ECE programmes and/or settings as a part of the process of defining the ECE system. Hearing directly from providers can greatly enhance the understanding of the barriers and opportunities that providers face, which in turn can help inform the design of an effective system.

When covering both public and private providers ...

It can be challenging to bring a large unregulated or under-regulated private sector under the quality assurance umbrella without strong incentives and/or enforcement mechanisms, including enough staff to monitor private providers.

Additional costing and financing exercises will help determine how to allocate an adequate budget for this inclusive type of quality assurance system.



D. Monitoring mechanisms

Key questions

How will ECE settings be monitored?

Who will take responsibility for quality assurance and improvement, and what capacities and tools do they need to ensure the system is effective?

Why is this important?

Although more low- and middle-income countries are developing quality standards for pre-primary education, fewer have developed mechanisms to monitor these standards effectively, and there is scant documentation of these practices. For ECE settings to benefit from the existence of quality standards, mechanisms and tools must be in place to assess the extent to which quality standards are reached.

The effectiveness of the quality assurance system requires capacity from national to local levels, as well as sufficient resources – both human and financial – to maximize data coverage and ensure data quality.

What options are a good fit?

The main task here is to consider what types of tools, mechanisms and procedures are needed for monitoring and enforcing the quality standards. In addition, an analysis should take place to account for gaps in the existing system, and where additional capacity may be needed, expanding the analysis to include sources of professional development and training.

To effectively and consistently monitor quality and support improvement, it is important for monitoring staff to be able to fully assess the extent to which services are meeting standards, and to have the skills to help providers address areas of weakness. The methods will typically include two types of monitoring: external monitoring of service quality conducted by inspectors, and internal monitoring by staff who work within the ECE setting.

1.

External monitoring

features two key mechanisms, which can both be led by a government authority that has responsibility for quality assurance at the national or subnational level:

1. Accreditation, also known as *registration or licensing*, involves seeking approval to operate from an independent external body at the national or subnational level. Typically, before or shortly after a setting opens, a site visit takes place to ensure compliance with regulations. Settings may need to renew their accreditation. While accreditation usually focuses on minimum levels of quality to operate, it may be associated with incentives for good performance such as a higher rate of government reimbursement for higher quality. Tips for approaches to accreditation include the following:

- Countries can consider identifying an authority that has the expertise on accreditation.
- A comprehensive incentive-based system can be developed as part of the accreditation process.
- For new ECE providers, it may be helpful to envision and develop a strategy around registration via the local municipality/government prior to operation; a further set of assessments could lead to a licence of operation, accreditation and feedback, accompanied by periodic review of accredited centres.

2. Inspection, or external review, is commonly used to monitor service quality on a more regular basis. It often involves a visit to the setting by an official to observe and assess the quality of the setting. Inspections can focus on two main areas: regulatory compliance, and communication and collaboration within settings and with families. Tips for approaches to inspections include the following:

- Availability of time and resources (human and financial) is critical.
- The time frame to complete self-evaluation and external evaluation processes should be reasonable, e.g., monitoring process quality tends to be more time- and labour-intensive.
- There should also be sufficient inspectors to visit services, including those in more rural and remote areas, on a regular basis.

2.

Internal monitoring

is conducted by managers and practitioners who work in an ECE setting. The most common form of internal monitoring is self-evaluation, which is a voluntary activity in most countries. Although the content of self-evaluations is not usually prescribed at the national level, internal monitoring of service quality tends to focus on collaboration among staff and on communication between staff and parents. Other areas of attention include the availability of materials, implementation of the curriculum, quality of the facility/classroom, and leadership or management of the setting.

To support internal quality monitoring, guidelines and self-assessment tools such as surveys, portfolios, and journals or checklists can be developed to help staff and administrators document and critically reflect on their practice and the overall functioning of the setting.

Guidelines can help providers define the areas for self-evaluation; select the instruments for carrying out the self-evaluation; process, analyse and interpret the collected data; and ensure that the information contributes to the quality assurance plan for the setting.

A mechanism is ...

The logical assembly of components, elements or parts, and the associated energy and information flows, that enables a machine, process or system to achieve its intended result.

Source: BusinessDictionary.com, WebFinance Inc., 2019, <www.businessdictionary.com/definition/mechanism.html>.

Ask these questions to help articulate your country's approach to monitoring mechanisms:

- Does existing legislation mandate registration/licensing for early childhood services to operate?
- Does the law apply equally to public and private preschools and to services operating in schools and community settings, or is there another mechanism to ensure that all settings protect children's health and safety?
- Which institutions should be involved in monitoring and/or quality assurance? What would be the roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder?
- What kind of evaluation tools need to be developed and validated for implementation of the quality assurance system?
- What communication mechanisms are needed to support the implementation process?
- What kind of training is required to implement the monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms, procedures and tools? How will this training be adapted for different levels, e.g., decision makers, implementers, local authorities, preschool personnel and teachers?

Consider these points when defining monitoring mechanisms.

- **Mechanisms, tools and procedures** for monitoring should ensure that the voices of diverse stakeholders, including parents, are heard and reflect the diverse implementation issues that appear within a pre-primary subsector.
- **Monitoring mechanisms and procedures** should be reliable, accurate and transparent. Aim for standardized data collection, including alignment with existing standards. It might be useful, for example, to integrate a subset of indicators within the national Education Management Information System as part of regular data collection.
- **Quality assurance mechanisms**, procedures and tools should be user-friendly for both decision makers and implementers. This means that the definitions, stages and steps of quality assurance should be clearly defined and supported by simple tools.

Creating stronger capacities for monitoring

Examining the degree of coordination between organizations responsible for or engaged in quality assurance is a first step towards clarifying where capacity-building is needed. For example, are the desired profiles of inspectors and other monitoring personnel in place, or do they need additional training and support? Can the system draw on experienced current or former early childhood educators?

After identifying who is responsible for monitoring and how much training in ECE this group has, the next step is to find out whether they are able to use existing tools effectively, whether monitoring tools need to be revised or if entirely new tools need to be developed.

Inspectors need clear information – manuals, guidelines, tools – to support standardization and consistent monitoring across settings. ECE settings need clear guidance on how they can use and implement quality standards and reach compliance. And local government institutions and monitoring staff should participate in training in how to support ECE settings in reaching compliance. Determining whether the setting is meeting service standards can be facilitated by the use of surveys, interviews, observations, self-evaluation and other tools to collect information from different sources and triangulate these data.

Capacity-building for development of the mechanisms, procedures and tools to effectively and consistently monitor quality and help programmes address areas for improvement can be supported by development partners and international resources and expertise.



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III. Following through:

A comprehensive vision for building quality assurance systems

These guidelines show how well-defined, contextually relevant and comprehensive quality standards embedded in a functional quality assurance system are essential for quality ECE services and improved learning outcomes. This section discusses the broader aspects of strengthening quality assurance systems.

While quality standards are at the heart of the system, they are not a stand-alone product. For quality standards to serve their purpose, they need to be founded in clear quality assurance goals, a well-defined scope of implementation and established mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and quality improvement, as illustrated in Figure 2.

This work will be most effective if attention is given to each and all of the elements, but there is no prescribed sequence for addressing the elements and they need not all be tackled simultaneously. The quality assurance system of each country will be at a different stage of development and will progress at its own pace; therefore, the context and entry points for strengthening the system will vary.

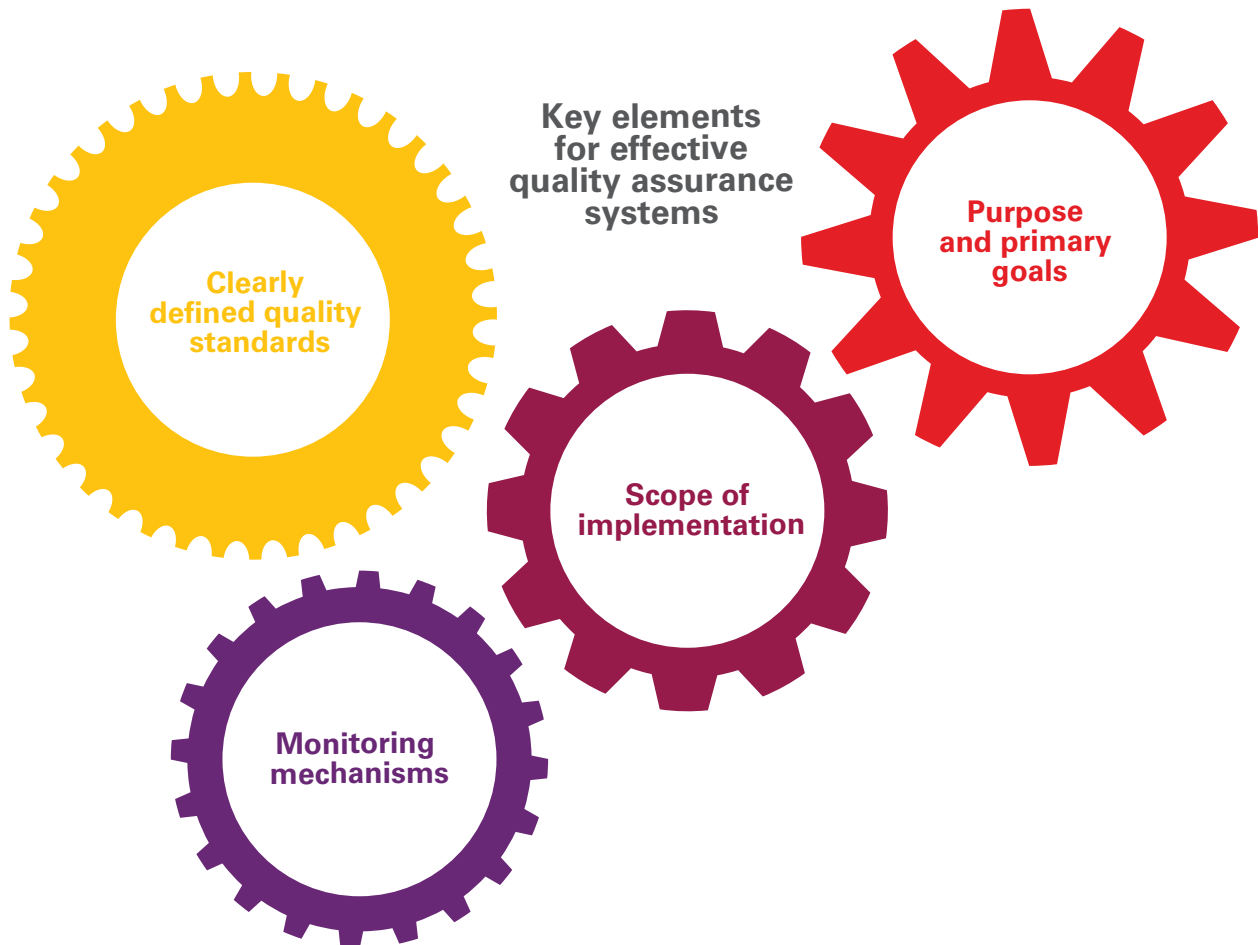


Figure 2. Quality standards and the supporting elements.

In countries where the ECE subsector is nascent, an immediate task might be to develop foundational quality standards and identify the goals of the quality assurance system. In other countries, quality standards might already be well-defined, and the focus is on articulating the scope of the quality assurance system. This offers an opportunity to reconsider the monitoring mechanisms – for example, expanding the scope to include all ECE providers has an impact on how the system will ensure uniform compliance with quality standards.

Even as decisions are made at different times or in varying degrees of emphasis, ultimately, these efforts should be coordinated and anchored in a comprehensive vision for the quality assurance system. Such a vision will enable each country to respond to immediate needs, while reflecting thoughtful consideration of all the key elements needed to develop a strategy to strengthen the quality assurance system. These guidelines offer a resource for countries to see the bigger picture and, at the same time, advocate for further funding to carry out this work.

Key entry point: Education sector planning

Quality assurance is indivisibly connected to the other core functions of ECE, including planning and resource allocation, curriculum development and implementation, workforce development, and family and community engagement.⁶ Therefore, the process of building and strengthening quality assurance systems should be clearly linked with the development or strengthening of the pre-primary education subsector as a whole. A country may choose to engage in the review of its quality assurance system for education or ECE as part of an overall quality improvement exercise or in the context of potential funding for governments to undertake systems-strengthening work.

In the process for developing a national education sector plan, monitoring and quality assurance across subsectors will undoubtedly be addressed, including identifying key indicators for ECE. Sector planning therefore provides a unique opportunity to support quality assurance-related efforts. Countries may consider including the strengthening of quality standards and quality assurance systems for ECE as a key activity under the education sector plan. With the assistance of these guidelines, such opportunities should be seized on to propel the pre-primary quality assurance system into the forefront of action planning.

The progressive process of building quality assurance systems

Building and operationalizing a well-functioning quality assurance system is not a one-time activity. The development and implementation of a quality assurance system takes time and resources, as well as systematic and sustained engagement on a regular basis. This is possible when the quality assurance system is institutionalized within the government system as a core practice.

The quality assurance units of the ministry of education, national quality agencies/councils and accreditation bodies are well-positioned to support the tasks of the quality assurance system. Some countries may also have dedicated central ECE agencies or councils that can participate in the mandate of quality assurance. Institutionalizing the quality assurance system within these entities helps ensure continuity and sustainability of the process for building and strengthening quality assurance systems.

Development partners can provide technical support to these bodies/agencies to strengthen the quality assurance system for ECE within the broader education quality assurance system. In all instances, it is important to engage in advocacy efforts to ensure that quality assurance for ECE is well understood among all stakeholders with the specificities of the subsector and that ministries of education are well-equipped to lead on effective monitoring of the pre-primary subsector.



Endnotes

- 1 United Nations Children's Fund, *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education*, UNICEF, New York, April 2019, available at <<https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-world-ready-to-learn-report>>.
- 2 Bertram, Tony, and Chris Pascal, *Early Childhood Policies and Systems in Eight Countries: Findings from IEA's Early Childhood Education Study*, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, Hamburg, Germany, 2016, available at <<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-39847-1>>. See also Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring quality in early childhood education and care*, OECD, Paris, 2015, available at <www.oecd.org/publications/starting-strong-iv-9789264233515-en.htm>.
- 3 In particular, the guidelines are informed by the literature and analysis reviewed in United Nations Children's Fund, 'Background Paper on Quality Standards and Quality Assurance Systems for Pre-Primary Education', UNICEF, New York, 2018, and further substantiated by United Nations Children's Fund, 'Conceptual Framework for the Pre-Primary Subsector', UNICEF, New York, forthcoming in 2019.
- 4 Based on Bertram and Pascal, *Early Childhood Policies and Systems*, and 'Starting Strong IV'.
- 5 Yoshikawa, Hirokazu, and Ana María Nieto, 'Paradigm Shifts and New Directions in Research on Early Childhood Development Programs in Low- and Middle-Income Countries', *Handbook of Early Childhood Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2013, pp. 487–500.
- 6 For details on the core functions, see United Nations Children's Fund, 'Conceptual Framework for the Pre-Primary Subsector', UNICEF, New York, forthcoming in 2019.



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