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It Takes a System to Achieve Quality in Early Childhood Services

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Point zero

We are making a deliberate choice to not begin this article by evoking the many convincing evidences already produced at least in the past decade around the importance of early years in the life of an individual. We start from the assumption that everybody reading this article shares the common understanding about the sound foundations that are laid in the first years of life, a period of opportunities which should never be missed (Vandell, 2010; Moore et al., 2017; Mathers et al., 2014).

What we would like to discuss is the *quality* of the child's 'life experience' in the early years which is highly dependent on what the adults around them are able and capable of offering to young children. While families are the first environment where most of the children grow, develop and learn, their life experience expands much beyond that, to neighbourhoods, communities, to public and private spaces where interactions, communication, actions and events are happening. Nothing is meaningless for the young children, everything is about making meaning of the world they live in while observing and learning from and with their peers and adults. There is however, an important difference: some environments are more formally organized, therefore intentional, planned, resourced and outcome oriented, and carry an important social responsibility for children and their families. These are the early childhood services. And the quality they provide is of utmost importance for both children and families (Sylva, 2014; Slot, 2018; Melhuish et al., 2004).

We start from the understanding that quality is a very complex, dynamic and complicated concept. The 'definition' of quality is rooted in constructed beliefs 'impregnated' with values. Quality is never value free and therefore is a (conscious or 'unconscious') axiological choice. For this reason, when we talk about the quality of services, we very much talk about both the values that are embedded in the everyday life operation of services and those that

are the flagship of any intention to create changes to improve the quality of those services. On a more systemic level, these values have strong political connotations, therefore quality becomes a political choice. Do quality services mean also equitable and inclusive services? Does quality mean agency and participation of stakeholders and children in decision-making and co-creating changes aimed at better results? Do quality services mean also to reach out to the most vulnerable?

We would like to share some reflections and what we have learned in ISSA¹ about *process*² quality and its systemic nature and invite you to reflect together on possible strategic approaches that may sustain a culture of quality across the early childhood and the education system. For this reason, we will use the ‘competent system’³ concept in sharing our learning and propose a four-tier reflection around nurturing the *process* quality improvement, departing from the individual level, moving to the institutional level, then to the inter-institutional level and to the policy and governance level. The lessons we learned over the years emerged from working with a group of ISSA member organizations from 25 countries from Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia and collecting data about their work on quality improvement in countries. All 25 members have been using a package of resources⁴ developed in ISSA which is focusing primarily on quality pedagogy and strengthening professionalism among preschool and primary school teachers, but also other key stakeholders in the early childhood and the education system.

Building a culture about ‘quality’ – spinning the wheel of change in systems

ISSA has extensive experience in generating knowledge and practice towards supporting practitioners working in early childhood services up to primary school. Many of its core programmes are aimed at finding meaningful, relevant and effective ways to reach out to individual professionals to stimulate their professional growth, knowing that to a great extent the quality of the child’s learning and development experiences depends on professionals’ competences, as well as on their agency, self-confidence and attitude towards their profession. (Siraj et al., 2018)

Our concern for *process* quality is deliberate. We strongly believe that this is the place where values are given meaning, where theories, research evidences and policies are

¹ ISSA is an early childhood international association founded in 1999. Currently, ISSA has more than 80 member organizations from 40 countries in Europe and Central Asia. Its main programmes and initiatives revolve around issues of quality and equity in early childhood service. For more information about ISSA: www.issa.nl.

² By process quality we mean the everyday interactions with peers, adults and the environment, and the everyday experiences (play, routines, structured or unstructured activities) through which children learn, impacting their overall development.

³ Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Peeters, J., Lazzari, A., and Van Laere, K. (2011). *Competence requirements in early childhood education and care. CoRe Final Report*. Brussels: European Commission.

⁴ For more information about the ISSA’s Quality Resource Pack, visit: https://www.issa.nl/publications_search?field_main_category_tid=2&field_all_tags_tid=All

translated into practice, and understandings, actions and learning are tested, demonstrated and co-created through inter-actions between children and adults. It is the most dynamic area of quality because of its multifactorial and intertwined nature, therefore much harder to be controlled and measured, but very fertile in the effects that it may determine on both children and adults (Slot, 2018).

When talking about process quality in preschool or primary school, the first thing that comes into many people's minds is the teacher – the key holder of the quality 'equation'. They are seen as the main authors of the everyday blueprint, the ones filtering or creating the conditions and opportunities for learning to happen. For this reason, much relies on their competences to reflect, plan, decide, act, inter-act, re-act to the ever changing social-emotional-mental landscape they encounter (and also 'de-code') in each and every day when they meet children and families. And each day is different, therefore strengthening their competences is key. In fact, many of the reforms in early childhood and in education systems relied to a large extent on the capacity of teachers to adapt to new contexts, to learn and do things in a different way. But not that many took into consideration that by building the capacity of individuals or by demanding more from them, you are not necessarily managing to change a system. We often talk about people's mindset as being the main barrier in creating opportunities for change to happen. And indeed, the mindset counts tremendously when the required changes are demanding a new positioning in relation to people, actions, processes, but means also challenging someone's individual values, feelings and behaviours. And for such changes to happen, an enabling environment is needed too.

ISSA was founded in 1999 uniting 28 non-governmental organizations from Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia who were implementing since 1994 a child-centred, democratic value-based early childhood programme called the Step by Step Program created by the Open Society Network and Children's Resources International. The program was requiring a re-positioning of the teacher in relation to the child, family, community, learning environment, and most of all, towards their role in the learning process, towards families, and towards the child's 'academic' outcomes. It was a new approach based on evidence-based developmental and pedagogical theory⁵ which was celebrating the child's agency and was empowering teachers to make pedagogical choices based on (democratic) values that were not necessarily fully embraced by the practice and policy of those times. An immense investment was put into creating competent individual teachers to implement the new pedagogical approach within the existing curriculum and policy. Quality Standards have been defined (2003), mentoring capacity and programmes built in the programme, communities of professionals created, tools for self-evaluation and improvement developed, and certification processes recognizing high-quality practice were introduced. In a study developed in 2008,⁶ ISSA was interested in learning about the impact of the work

⁵ Theories of Jean Piaget, Lev Vigotski, John Dewey, Howard Gardner, Erik Erikson laid the theoretical foundation of the programme.

⁶ See *Study on the Implementation of ISSA Pedagogical Standards and Their Impact of ECDE Policies and Practice in the Region of ISSA Network and Beyond (2001-2008)*, (2010). <https://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/pdf/Publications/quality/Implementation-Quality-Executive-Summary-FINAL.pdf>

done at country level through the training and mentoring programmes put in place and by using the ISSA Pedagogical Standards within mechanisms for quality assurance and improvement.

The insights at that time were quite interesting looking from a systemic perspective.

1. At the individual practice level, while the teaching, mentoring and teacher support skills were improved, the recognition and professional status of the teachers were elevated, and innovative mentor training models were identified as best practices, after more than 10 years of investment, the lack of national and local understanding and acceptance of the new approach was still noted among the challenges, together with the variation in resources and classroom conditions.
2. At the institution and inter-institutional level, the involvement of managers/leaders of preschools and schools led to the creation of a 'culture' of quality. In addition, the creation of peer learning communities, creating networks of (pre)schools in the same region and creating partnerships with training institutes and universities were mentioned among best practices, as well as involving parents in trainings to become informed 'consumers' and advocates for quality. However, the lack of understanding the quality standards as a quality improvement strategy, the poor programme or structural quality remained as main challenges in many countries.
3. At the policy level, the ISSA Pedagogical Standards influenced in a number of countries the national curricula, the teacher standards, and the quality improvement guidelines. However, the misalignment of the Standards with other national education system requirements and guidelines remained a challenge in many countries.

In conclusion, by engaging different stakeholders at different levels in the system, but mostly practitioners (teachers, mentors, supervisors, managers), the wheel of change started spinning in many countries, but still there was a long way to go to align structural quality with process quality, or in other words, many policies with practice, and to build a coherent culture about 'quality' at all levels in the system, including parents as important partners.

For the next ten years ISSA continued to revisit its 'definition' of quality pedagogy (including moving from quality *standards* to quality *principles*) in order to reflect the priorities in the changing early childhood contexts. It co-created with its members and other experts a package of resources⁷ aimed at influencing the multi-layered systems, while ensuring its members receive the technical support they need for working with the resources, and embarked again in a reflexive exercise. This time, ISSA's main purpose was to learn even more about how far it reached by incorporating new knowledge coming from both practice and research and leveraging the power of an international community to enable changes in practice and policies to happen in countries. Which are the key factors

⁷ The package included: a guidebook for educators, a professional development tool to be used by educators and mentors/coachers, an assessment instrument to be used for monitoring and guiding the professional development plans, a guidebook for pre- and in-service training providers, advocacy leaflets targeting educators, parents and decision-makers, and a video library.

that contributed to new advancements in 25 ISSA members' work on quality improvement at country level by using the 'know-how' created in the network and by benefiting from being a member in such a learning community. And where did we fail?

The two-year work on documenting this work⁸ shed some light on some insightful conclusions.

Supporting practitioners and services – how far can we reach?

The findings indicated that long-lasting changes in practice have been noted where practitioners embarked in professional development processes where they found safe and meaningful guidance on how to improve themselves 'allowing' others to support them. The result was that observing others and wanting to be observed (videos accompanied by guided discussions played an important role), reflecting on own and others' practice, engaging in respectful discussions with peers where solid arguments are based on scientific evidence and strongly connected with daily practice created a climate of support for quality improvement. Teachers felt empowered to become better professionals in a safe and respectful professional environment.

'I feel more autonomous and aware that I am doing the right thing. I see how much children are growing and developing. This raises my professional confidence.'
(Kindergarten teacher, Slovenia)

In many contexts, quality mentoring and coaching programmes accompanied by meaningful resources focusing on quality pedagogy aimed at supporting dialogical processes, were key to creating a culture of quality.

'In the process of mentoring based on QRP⁹ each teacher provided a kind of demonstrative lesson for a group of other teachers. It gives us an opportunity to compare our practices with each other. We don't feel any stress during those visits, and almost every day somebody else is in my classroom. Whenever a teacher has free time, she can go to observe another teacher. We also plan together and, in this process we use the Professional Development Tool.'
(Primary school teacher, Armenia)

In other countries, communities of learning among practitioners have been created at the level of services and also across services (e.g. Slovenia, Armenia, Croatia, Moldova, Kosovo, etc.) aimed at providing a structured context for pedagogical guidance to happen.

⁸ <https://www.issa.nl/node/550>

⁹ ISSA's Quality Resource Pack.

‘Educators are more willing to take risks because the environment is more supportive. Before, educators were not listening to each other, were not discussing important things and were not preparing examples of practice [to illustrate quality – Ed.]. The work in the learning communities helps them understand their own strengths.’

(Director of primary school, Slovenia)

The dialogue around process quality at the level of the setting has been pivotal to building a culture around quality, because it created a platform for building a shared and negotiated understanding of what quality means in practice, which was relevant to teachers. Quality was not an abstract concept ‘given’ solely by some theory from some scientific publication or policy paper, but one that was co-created by teachers by building on both research-based evidence and teachers’ accumulated knowledge and experience.

While teachers felt empowered to be active contributors to changes in their own practice to better respond to children’s and families’ demands, their pro-active and reflexive attitudes towards self-improvement required a participative, forward-looking management interested in investing in pedagogical leadership and in recognizing the importance of nurturing professionalism at the service level.

‘The topics of discussions among teachers started to become different. Before this project (Mentoring with QRP), teachers almost never communicated among themselves, but now we observe much more cooperation and it is strongly focused on professional issues. They plan together and after observing each other’s lessons, they discuss what was good and what should be changed next time. The relationships are much warmer. Finally, teachers are able to explain their goals and the steps they need to take in order to achieve their goals. All those changes indicate that they have improved their understanding of the educational processes and are more confident in discussing them with others.’

(Deputy Director, primary school, Armenia)

In two of the countries where more in depth data has been collected (Slovenia and Croatia), the efforts put into building the capacity to create and support professional learning communities at the level of services by using and adapting the resources created in ISSA led to a sustainable model of professional development. There the communities of professionals periodically meet, discuss and plan together their professional development agenda. In these two cases, a considerable effort has been made equally in leadership training for the facilitators of communities of practice/learning communities. These facilitators specifically received from the ISSA member ongoing and continuous training at least three times during the school year to help them manage and facilitate the learning process within learning communities.

‘In the coordinators’ meetings, we exchange information and gather different content. Others are always bringing new information to us. We do not feel a burden to know everything. We are constructing knowledge together.’

(School coordinator in Slovenia)

The findings in the study indicated that for such professional fertile contexts to exist, certain structural conditions need to be in place: a sufficient space to meet; paid time to meet, have a dialogue, document, plan, and reflect on work; a shared quality framework (such as the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy and QRP) to monitor and evaluate practices; and guidance for staff, showing appreciation, and ways to document growth.

This is the point where we reach the other levels of the system (institutional and policy level) and learn about the extent to which these levels are responsive in creating the appropriate conditions for enabling effective professional development programmes. In many countries, such forms of professional development are not valued and therefore not recognized as the main avenues for strengthening professionalism. In such cases, it is more likely that the provision of short-term, theory-based training will lead to short-term changes in practice, fading away in time, leaving space to the practice that pays a tribute to the legacy of the past or to routine work that is hardly questioned and/or critically reflected upon.

We also learned through our research that in some countries there is little alignment between the pre-service, the in-service training and the real demands coming from practice, from working directly with children and families in very diverse contexts. Future practitioners are not well prepared to respond to the increasing demands of the teaching profession, or the in-service training does not necessarily continue their preparation for the profession in line with the practitioners' potential and the challenges of working in particular and dynamic contexts. Such inter-institutional misalignment indicates a discontinued or diverse understanding within the early childhood system of the profile of the professional in relation to the actual job context, but also of the role of the early childhood service. Consequently, this indicates a lack of shared understanding of what quality pedagogy means.

It was clear from the findings of our documentation study that the main barriers to quality improvement reside in the diversity of 'languages' about quality and less common places for dialogue between policy and decision-makers, researchers, pre-service and in-service providers, supervision agencies, managers of services, practitioners and parents. The plurality of perspectives may be an asset as long as they focus on children's and families' well-being and there is a dialogue about quality and about creating mechanisms for empowering professionals to become better professionals and for services to become more meaningful for children and families. Research is providing enough evidence of what works to strengthen professionalism in teachers. Practice is demanding professional competences that are highly responsive to increasingly complex contexts and needs of children and families. However, the reality demonstrates that practice is not changing as fast as we would expect, despite the many efforts put into supporting practitioners and services.

What can be done to continue spinning the wheel?

Enlarging the backpack of expectations for practitioners and even creating evidence-based 'innovative' programmes to enhance their competences is only half of the way towards ensuring early childhood services where children are finding the well-deserved opportunities to grow, learn and develop, and families the rightful support.

We learned that working on the individual and institutional level has proven to be effective and long lasting in terms of changing the pedagogical paradigm and the practices in those places where the institutional leadership had a vested interest in building a culture of quality that was child and staff centred and loyal to the current demands of children and families, as well as in enabling structural conditions for meaningful professional development for the staff. Professionals felt empowered, supported and stimulated to think critically and innovatively, generating themselves new knowledge and practice that were animated by creating quality learning experiences for children and building stronger partnerships with families. Such services/institutions are only illustrating that change can happen and can last in spite of the challenges they encounter, but will not change a system, they are only striving within a system.

The wheels of change moved slower when engaging with pre-service providers and governmental institutions, both more responsible for the structural quality – professional qualifications, pre- and in-service training policies, as well as remuneration, career development policies, etc.

Both structural and process quality go hand in hand and they should reflect common values. This would imply an alignment between the political choice (ensuring enabling conditions through certain policies and mechanisms for policy implementation, including finances) and the pedagogical choice (creating enabling conditions through practices) both rooted in values.

While documenting the work done by ISSA members in their countries, we learned that in many countries policies have changed their language and embraced a more child-centred discourse, but practice is still lagging behind, meaning that the 'mechanisms to create' child-centred practice at the level of the system are not working. New concepts penetrated the mainstream pedagogical and policy language, but child-centred practices did not become the mainstream practice in many early childhood systems. This is the very symptom of the lack of shared and profound understanding of the child-centred philosophy at all levels of the system. Moreover, it indicates that there is lack of dialogue between the diverse stakeholders who play an important role in shaping the systems, only then will they understand that although they might speak the same 'language' their understanding is different. And only then will they find the lack of coordination in their (fragmented) actions.

Within our study we learned that the democratic culture of dialogue is the most fertile place for quality to strive, be it on the level of the service, or among different institutions, governmental and non-governmental organization, and parents. It is there where different voices are heard, understandings are negotiated, elaborated and shared, thus leading to a more cohesive approach, more coordinated actions at different levels in the early childhood system. Platforms where research, policy and practice meet and discuss about quality and explore more cohesive and better coordinated ways to improve early childhood systems need to be established, so that we talk about the same child, the same families and the same services.

Author

Dr. Mihaela Ionescu is the Program Director in ISSA – The International Step by Step Association, a membership association that connects professionals and organizations from Europe and Central Asia working in the field of early childhood development (www.issa.nl). In the past 30 years she has been working in many capacities from primary school teacher to researcher and education policy developer, from trainer to manager of programmes aimed at improving the quality of early childhood education and care services, from small to national scale. Currently, she is deeply involved in ISSA's strategic programme development and in developing and implementing programmes aimed at providing equitable and high-quality early childhood services in countries from ISSA regions. She coordinated the development of several resources in ISSA, most of them focused on process quality and professionalism in early childhood services (see [Roads to Quality](#), [Quality Framework for Early Childhood Services for Children Under Three](#)) and recently coordinated the development of a toolkit for strengthening integration in early childhood systems within the [INTESYS](#) project.

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