

THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES IN LATIN AMERICA

An Agenda for Change

Introduction

Today, the importance of the first years of life on the formation of human capital is widely recognized. During these early years, interventions are more effective, and it is less costly to remedy any developmental delays.

Latin America and the Caribbean has the highest levels of inequality of any region in the world. Differences in knowledge and skills between low-income children and their more advantaged peers begin in the early years and grow throughout the rest of their lives. During these early years, learning is critical to reducing the potential impact of a disadvantaged family background, not only on academic performance, but also on future economic and employment opportunities.

In this context, the countries of the region have been devoting greater efforts and resources to expand coverage and strengthen the quality of services offered to families with children under the age of five. However, the youngest children continue to receive the smallest share of investment: for every dollar spent on a child under the age of 5, more than 3 dollars are spent on

a child between the ages of 6 and 11. Additionally, ensuring quality services continues to be one of the most important challenges.

For the purpose of this document, early childhood development (ECD) services are defined as the combination of social services directed at children from birth until they start primary education. These services can be institutional in nature (via schools, daycare or health centers) or home-based, and can be framed within health, education, or social development and protection policies and programs.

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This note, prepared by M. Caridad Araujo, Ariel Fiszbein and Mercedes Mateo Díaz, summarizes the agreements reached during a seminar in Washington, DC organized by the Inter-American Dialogue and the Inter-American Development Bank on February 28 and March 1, 2017. The agenda and names of the participants are included in the annexes.

This document presents several elements that should be taken into account when designing new programs, or when adapting and scaling up existing ones, to ensure that high-quality early childhood development services reach their intended beneficiaries. These elements are not just a list of isolated requirements; they must be considered together. That is, to achieve high-quality services, the various elements must be integrated. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all children in the region reach their full developmental potential.

These ideas and recommendations are the result of a debate between experts, policymakers, and professionals from ministries and other agencies involved in the provision of ECD services in the region, who attended a seminar in Washington, DC on February 28 and March 1, 2017.¹ That debate and this document are part of a broader effort to define a Regional Agenda on Early Childhood Development, which began in São Paulo in September 2015 and continued in Lima in September 2016 with the participation of a broad group of civil society, governmental and multilateral organizations.²

Elements for ensuring the quality of early childhood development services

A. General principles

Improving child development requires high-quality services. Quality improvements in institutional ECD services in nursery and pre-school centers, and family and health services, all require changes along two dimensions. On the one hand, they require improvements in structural quality, involving issues such as infrastructure, the professional qualifications of staff, the size of groups receiving services, child-caregiver ratios, the duration and frequency of interventions, the availability of materials, and other aspects that are more directly observable and measurable. On the other hand, they also require improvements in the quality of processes, such as the way the curriculum is implemented, how the system works with families and children at home, and the frequency and quality of interactions between children and adults

(parents, educators, teachers, caregivers and other adults important in children's lives).

Early childhood development is a process of progressive skill acquisition that can be put at risk by poor quality services. Early childhood development, defined as the biological, cognitive, and emotional changes that occur during the early years of life, consists of the progressive acquisition of motor, cognitive, language, self-regulatory, socio-emotional and perceptual skills, which set the foundation for the acquisition of other skills later in life. Depending on the child's home life and childcare arrangements, poor-quality services not only fail to contribute to the child's development, but can even be harmful. Unfortunately, the quality of ECD services in Latin America is low and can endanger the achievements of the ECD agenda.

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It is necessary to change how quality is understood.

The most conventional measures of structural quality, on which many efforts have focused, are not sufficient. Process quality—particularly regarding the relationship between adults and children—is fundamental to achieving adequate early child development, and there are ways to measure it. It is critical to implement high-quality measurement and monitoring systems that include the previously mentioned dimensions and allow for linking quality indicators to the achievement of learning and child development objectives.

To achieve greater equity in results, it is important to prioritize the investment of public resources in children from the most vulnerable households. In high-inequality contexts, such as Latin America, fulfilling every child's right to full development when limited resources do not

1. We thank Mayaris Cubides, Marta Dormal, María Adelaida Martínez and Johan Rocha for their support in their reporting activities during the seminar, and María Oviedo for her leadership in the organization of the event.
2. Details of such meetings and the corresponding documents can be found at <http://www.thedialogue.org/early-childhood-development/>

allow for the public provision of free universal services implies that the priority of public programs should be to guarantee quality services for the most vulnerable children and families. The low participation rate of the most vulnerable households in publically-financed ECD services is still a major public policy challenge. High-income, highly educated households have the highest participation rates for ECD services. In other words, children who need the services the most (those with the lowest income or in the most vulnerable conditions, indigenous peoples, and people with special needs or disabilities) participate the least. In these cases, the problem may not only be an issue of access (coverage) and targeting, but also of use; that is, it may not be a problem of supply, but instead one of insufficient demand. In certain cases, this calls for implementing specific strategies to attract vulnerable families to high quality programs, for example, by adjusting schedules and reducing travel time, among others.

B. The role of the State

The State has the dual responsibility to provide services and regulate their provision to ensure quality. The role of the State as a regulator to ensure quality applies to all services that children and families receive, regardless of the nature of the provider. This is a stewardship role that the State must assume and reinforce, one that it should not and cannot abandon. At the same time, given the great diversity of needs children face, depending upon the geographical and cultural contexts in which they live, it is important that regulations allow for sufficient flexibility and capacity to respond and adapt services to each situation.

C. Quality assurance systems

Effective quality assurance systems must be built. The first step to building these systems is to establish standards regarding (i) the skills and knowledge that children must acquire and the developmental level they must achieve; (ii) the knowledge and competencies that adult caretakers must have, including the necessary behavioral changes; and (iii) the structural and process quality parameters with which public and private sector service providers must comply. These three types of standards should exist for the entire programmatic spectrum of early childhood development services, and not just for early childhood care and pre-school services. In addition to defining standards, it is necessary to develop cost-effective methodologies to monitor compliance and, using this evidence, implement

incentives for those who meet the standards, as well as improvement plans and consequences for those who systematically violate them. Programs' budgetary, technical and other resources must be aligned with these goals.

A quality assurance system requires both positive and negative incentives to make it viable. Regulating the quality of service provision requires a system of rewards and punishments that affects both public and private providers. The use of financial incentives (to providers and/or sub-national governments) is a mechanism that can promote the adoption of quality-oriented models.

Improving service quality requires decision-making based on evidence generated from monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring systems (for service quality and child development results) are essential to inform the cycle of quality assurance and continuous quality improvement. Impact and process evaluations of ECD programs and services are also critical elements of this cycle. Governments need to build and strengthen the capacity of their technical teams to carry out quality assurance and continuous improvement processes. This requires not only reliable information and administrative records, but also political and financial commitments and effective governance mechanisms.

D. Curricular development

Curricular frameworks are important to build consensus around goals and to align training, monitoring and evaluation efforts. The implementation of curricula and protocols is an essential part of an ECD program's methodology for achieving its goals. It becomes even more important in contexts where the sector's human resources are not professionalized and lack strong systems for pre-service and in-service training. Curriculum implementation requires training and continuous improvement systems.

It is important to acknowledge the intersectoral dimensions of interventions and to develop curricular frameworks that guide both institutional work in childcare centers, as well as work with families. ECD services have the potential to reach children and families not only through institutional care centers but also through the health system. During prenatal care appointments, there are opportunities (which some countries in the region are already taking advantage of) that can be used to promote good parenting practices and to prepare adults for

their role as parents. In many of the region's countries, the healthcare system is the principal point of contact between families and the State during the first three years of life, until the beginning of pre-school. Therefore, it offers a platform to promote early childhood development through quality adult-child interactions at home as well as through game-based psychosocial development opportunities and learning. In other countries, families receive this care through social protection programs (such as parental support programs via home visits or group meetings), or even through cash transfer programs that target the most vulnerable sectors. In all these areas, there are opportunities to work with the child, and especially with his or her family, in the promotion of early childhood development. This work—often charged to community, volunteer and semi-professional personnel—requires structured curricular content and supporting materials that facilitate the responsibilities of those who work directly with families. The challenge of working with families is aligning family and community parenting practices with those that have shown the greatest impact in promoting child development, taking into account the local cultural context.

A greater effort is required to strengthen curricular frameworks. Currently, the content quality of the protocols and pedagogical and competency frameworks is very limited; some curricula are weak (or nonexistent), irrelevant and not evidence-based. In addition, there is a scarcity of personnel working in ECD services (teachers, community staff, caregivers, etc.) who have the competencies to execute the curricula faithfully. Improvements require: (i) adopting pedagogical frameworks that establish competencies and specific learning and child development objectives for each age in different areas (cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional and motor); (ii) creating teaching materials and curricula that are integrated and aligned with the objectives of each dimension; (iii) emphasizing the development of skills through games to “learn how to learn,” (iv) developing pedagogies and structured learning guidelines that can help ECD personnel in low-capacity contexts; (v) using child and classroom practice monitoring to offer support to ECD personnel for improving their skills through training, resources, and support/mentoring; and (vi) incorporating specific actions that promote early childhood development into the protocols and rules currently used in maternal and child healthcare services (since these are often the first point of contact that vulnerable children and families have with public services). In each of these areas, it is critical to always keep in mind the developmental stages in a child's life.

Curricular frameworks should be created with a longitudinal perspective to facilitate transitions between the home, daycare centers, pre-schools and schools.

An important aspect of quality, which has not been developed strongly in the region so far, has to do with ensuring that pedagogical frameworks and curricula are consistent with one another and facilitate the difficult transitions children make during their first years of life: from their home to the daycare center, to pre-school and eventually to school. In this effort to achieve coherence, aligned protocols should also be incorporated into the health services aimed at this age group.

E. Human Resources

The management of high-quality human resources is essential. Historically, Latin American countries have not invested sufficient resources in training the workforce for early childhood development services. This is the case for the professional, semi-professional and community personnel who are responsible for direct childcare, as well as support, management, planning, and supervisory tasks of child development services in the field, tied to different sectors (most commonly education, nutrition, health and social services). Neither do these countries invest in the remuneration, support, mentoring and continuous training of ECD personnel. As a result, this sector suffers from poor-quality human resources as well as high turnover rates. This creates a serious bottleneck for the quality improvement of ECD services. Within the education sector, those who work in early childhood education often have not been trained in this area and are considered “second-rate” personnel (with regards to salary, career, and selection criteria). Without a structural change in all these aspects, high-quality human resources and services cannot be achieved.

A strategic approach to human resource planning must be incorporated into both the expansion of coverage and the quality improvement of existing services. Plans to expand the coverage and improve the quality of ECD services need a strategic focus on human resource planning. Strengthening staff training systems also requires more ambitious efforts to regulate public and private training institutions and their programs. Additionally, having a strategy for improving the training (initial and continuous) of all staff – professional, community and semi-professional – is critical. Furthermore, concrete support materials for working with children are necessary: activity guides, learning guidelines, curricula, play materials, and manuals for the development of play and learning materials, etc.

Improving human resource management requires rethinking the entire cycle, from recruitment, to the promotion, retention, and dismissal of professionals.

Administratively, it is necessary to strengthen human resource management systems in specific areas: solving administrative and managerial problems (late payments, insufficient inputs, lack of recognition); strengthening leadership roles; advancing towards meritocratic and transparent recruitment and promotion systems; establishing competitive remuneration and incentive/reward schemes to motivate and develop human resources; and facilitating professional development to stimulate and recognize employees' accomplishments. Furthermore, employee performance should be evaluated for continuous quality improvement and, using a dynamic approach, systems of re-certification for professionals and semi-professionals should be established.

Mentorship is a key tool for continuous quality improvement. Historically, community and semi-professional personnel have been essential in the provision of early childhood development services, and there has not been—and probably will not be in the medium term—a sufficient supply of professional personnel to carry out these tasks. Therefore, it is critical to invest in improving the quality of training systems for these roles. In this context, mentorship, as a strategy aligned with continuous quality improvement, has great potential. At the same time, professional personnel should be trained and encouraged to play the role of mentors.

F. Translating design into implementation

It is essential to strengthen the institutionalization of policies and programs. Institutional weaknesses affect the effectiveness of early childhood development policies and programs. The major institutional challenges affecting the quality of services are: coordination between sectors and levels of government (which may require an institution with coordinating power), budgetary insufficiency and instability, the lack of an evidence-based management system focused on results, a weak information management capacity, and a weak civil society. An early childhood development policy must pay special attention to the institutional and governance conditions in the sector and seek context-appropriate responses.

Coordination between sectors is possible when families and children are placed at the center of the equation. The work of service-providing entities should be organized around the needs of families and children. This involves

changing the logic with which line ministries have traditionally operated (and which revolves around each sector's supply), setting common goals, and aligning sectoral budgets—potentially within a results-based budget framework. It also requires a stronger emphasis on local management.

Unique identifier data systems are an essential tool without which coordination cannot happen. These systems should include personal information linked to a unique identifier for each individual that is common between sectors. They also require a physical infrastructure, the technical capacity to generate and maintain the systems, and the analytical capability to take advantage of them. Finally, they require a collaborative attitude and transparency between the different related sectors.

Ensuring quality management requires cross-sectoral and territorial coordination, which can be complex in certain cases. Depending on each country's government structure, the provision of early childhood development services may involve state, provincial and municipal governments as well as non-governmental organizations and the private sector. (i) For inter-sectoral coordination, a change in the logic of accountability is necessary. This is why budgeting for results can be an effective tool that facilitates the establishment of common goals and the alignment of sectoral efforts that may be necessary to achieve them. (ii) In the case of coordination between various levels of government, it is important to invest in generating demand and capacity in state and municipal governments so that they do not become an operational bottleneck for the implementation of ECD policies. It is also critical to clearly define each level's role. At the same time, the existence of large differences in resources and technical capacities between local governments may aggravate inequality, hence the importance of implementing support mechanisms that are focused particularly on those areas in order to avoid worsening inequality.

The sustainability of public investment in quality early childhood development services should not be tied to the degree of political commitment of different administrations. This requires the formulation of a state policy that gives continuity to technical and budgetary efforts. A national policy requires fulfilling commitments with legal goals and medium-term financing.

Civil society, including academia, plays a critical role within the institutional framework of early childhood development policies and programs. It acts as a: (i) service provider (with or without state subsidies);

(ii) actor/innovator in the process of formulating and monitoring public policy; (iii) promoter of social mobilization and civic, family and community commitment, as well as of cultural changes; (iv) educator of new generations of professionals in early childhood development; and (v) generator of evidence and evaluations.

Conclusion

Improving the quality of early childhood development services is a priority. Without improvements in quality, the expansion of coverage alone will not produce the results we seek. The challenge of improving quality requires, among other elements, a sustained investment in human resources, programmatic designs, and information and management systems, all supported by an institutional infrastructure providing strength and continuity. The reform agenda is complex and, necessarily, will have to adapt to the different conditions across countries. The proposals presented in this document constitute a minimum common framework that the participants of the Washington, DC seminar believe should guide the reform efforts in all countries of the region. In other words, it is the beginning, and not the end, of a much-needed Agenda for Change.

ANNEX 1

Seminar agenda

February 28, 2017

08:00-09:00	Participant Registration and light breakfast
09:00-09:30	<p>Opening Remarks and Participants' Introduction</p> <p>Michael Shifter (President, Inter-American Dialogue)</p> <p>Emiliana Vegas (Chief of the Education Division, Inter-American Development Bank)</p> <p>Ferdinando Regalia (Chief of the Division of Social Protection and Health, Inter-American Development Bank)</p>
09:30-09:45	<p>The Regional Agenda on Early Childhood Development and the Seminar's Objectives</p> <p>Ariel Fiszbein (Education Program Director, Inter-American Dialogue)</p>
09:45-11:00	<p>The Quality of Early Childhood Development Services</p> <p>How do we understand and measure the quality of early childhood development services? What is the effect of service quality on childhood development? What do we know about the quality of early childhood development services in the region?</p> <p>Hiro Yoshikawa (Professor of Globalization and Education, New York University): An international perspective</p> <p>Norbert Schady (Principal Economic Advisor for the Social Sector, Inter-American Development Bank): The Latin American perspective</p> <p>Moderator: Mercedes Mateo-Berganza Díaz (Lead Education Specialist, Inter-American Development Bank)</p>
11:00-11:15	Coffee Break
11:15-12:45	<p>The Quality Assurance System: Progress and Challenges</p> <p>What lessons have we learned from efforts to develop quality assurance systems for early childhood development services? Topics: legal bottlenecks, capacity to regulate public and private, institutional and non-institutional services, progress made in different service modalities (work with children, work with families). What is the perspective of providers about the quality assurance system? How to translate legal standards into standards that are met?</p> <p>Ana María Nieto (Director of the Early Childhood Unit, Ministry of Education, Colombia)</p> <p>Rodrigo Castillo (Advisor to the Subsecretariat of Pre-School Education, Ministry of Education, Chile)</p>

Adriana Antúnez (Director of the Family Support Unit of Uruguay Crece Contigo, Ministry of Social Development, Uruguay)

Michel Macara-Chvili (Vice-minister of Social Services, Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion, Peru)

Moderator: **Caridad Araujo** (Lead Economist, Division of Social Protection and Health, Inter-American Development Bank)

12:45-13:45

Lunch

13:45-14:45

Quality Assurance: The United States' Perspective

Kim Boller (Senior Fellow, Mathematica Policy Research): Quality Assurance

Sarah Weston and Sheila Williams (District of Columbia Public Schools): Curricular Reform

Moderator: **Emiliana Vegas** (Inter-American Development Bank)

14:45-16:00

Curriculum and Content: What Have we Learned?

Why is it necessary to have a curriculum and learning guidelines for early childhood development services? What is their instrumental value in the classroom, and from the point of view of accountability and quality assurance? Why has this topic been so controversial in the region but not in the rest of the world? What is the importance of having a curriculum with clear learning guidelines in contexts where the providers (educators, teachers, caretakers) have scarce information?

Carolina Maldonado (Associate Professor, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia)

Nathalia Mesa (AeioTu, Colombia)

Alicia Milán (Asst. Secretary, Council of Early and Primary Education, National Public Education Administration, Uruguay)

Roxana Cardarelli (Director of Early Childhood Education, Ministry of Education and Sports, Argentina)

Moderator: **Emiliana Vegas** (Inter-American Development Bank)

16:00-17:00

Working groups

17:00-17:45

Plenary discussion

Moderator: **Caridad Araujo** (Inter-American Development Bank)

17:45-18:00

Final reflections of the day

March 1, 2017

08:30-9:00	Light breakfast
09:00-09:15	Summary of previous day
09:15-10:45	<p>Managing High-Quality Human Resources</p> <p>What lessons have we learned from efforts to improve the management of human resources for formal education programs and for support to households and the community? What are the bottlenecks related to the functioning of civil service systems (careers, selection, compensation, etc.)? How do we promote adequate training at a large scale? What requirements are needed to regulate training institutions? How to best provide the needed support, monitoring and supervision to providers (educators, teachers, caretakers)?</p> <p>Raquel Bernal (Professor, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia)</p> <p>Jennifer Locasale-Crouch (Professor, University of Virginia)</p> <p>Mercedes Iacoviello (Professor, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina)</p> <p>Soledad García (National System for the Protection of Girls, Boys and Adolescents, México)</p> <p>Moderator: Ferdinando Regalia (Inter-American Development Bank)</p>
10:45-11:00	Coffee break
11:00-12:30	<p>High-Quality Early Childhood Development Services: Transforming Design into Implementation</p> <p>What are the problems (political, institutional, financial, and capacity-related) that must be resolved so that efforts to improve the quality of early childhood development services are fruitful? How do we respond to the political pressure to increase coverage with good quality? What is necessary to ensure that the financial and political commitment to the quality of early childhood development is sustainable over time?</p> <p>Lynn Kagan (Professor, Columbia University): What Are the Questions that Must be Answered?</p> <p>Roundtable with government representatives</p> <p>Moderator: Ariel Fiszbein (Inter-American Dialogue)</p>
12:30-14:00	Lunch
14:00-15:30	Working groups
15:30-16:30	<p>Plenary discussion</p> <p>Moderator: Mercedes Mateo Díaz (Inter-American Development Bank)</p>
16:30-16:45	Coffee break

16:45-18:00

Drafting of Conclusions

Moderator: **Ariel Fiszbein** (Inter-American Dialogue)

ANNEX 2

Participants

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Mexico

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Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal
Foundation, Brazil

Margaret Burchinal

University of North Carolina

David Calderón

Mexicanos Primero, Mexico

Maria Claudia Camacho

Organization of American States

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Argentina

Claudio Castillo

Ministry of Health, Chile

Rodrigo Castillo

Ministry of Education, Chile

Priscilla Cruz

Todos Pela Educação, Brazil

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