
DECLARATION OF THE REGIONAL FORUM

TOWARDS QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

AUGUST 2020



Ensuring the quality of early childhood education is critical for laying the foundation for the learning and development of all children in the region. The Regional Agenda for Integral Early Childhood Development accords a prominent place to the objective of attaining quality early childhood education. The second agreement in that Agenda calls on all countries to “strengthen efforts to achieve quality, relevant, and timely comprehensive services targeted to reaching children in early childhood in the environments in which their lives unfold”; and it identifies the need to establish “systems for quality assurance of governmental and non-governmental services geared to this population that are based on the expected holistic development of children.”

The Regional Forum on Quality in Early Childhood Education¹ met virtually from May to July 2020 to agree upon common strategies and recommendations for attaining the objective of quality early childhood education, as called for in the Regional Agenda. These meetings brought together representatives of government entities responsible for early childhood education, experts, and representatives of civil society organizations and cooperation agencies.

The recommendations presented here emerged from an intense dialogue and evidence-based analysis of experiences in different countries of the region. They are targeted not only to governments but also the multitude of actors involved nationally, locally, and regionally in designing and implementing child development policies and programs. Mindful of the diverse situations in the region, the recommendations express common objectives yet recognize the need to consider implementing them gradually. This would enable governments to identify different stages for implementation and to establish development plans in keeping with the progress their respective countries have made on the issues specified, while also taking account of the needs and context in each country.

Recommendation 1: A Quality Vision

We propose that countries in the region set an Agenda for Quality Early Childhood Education that considers a broad and relevant quality vision for young children’s education, taking stock of the relationship between learning and holistic development, with emphasis on both structural and process quality.

Expanding the quality vision for education relevant to early childhood requires focusing on learning and on quality interactions that promote holistic development, and not only on structural aspects (adult-child ratio, group size, classroom size, type of materials, security measures, etc.). To this end, it is essential to define the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that children should develop during this stage, with a keen focus on the relationship between learning and development.

To ensure the legitimacy and sustainability of the agenda for quality early childhood education, we suggest convening a permanent forum with the broad participation of strategic government actors (policymakers, mid-level managers, local implementers) as well as members of academia and civil society. This forum should have shared responsibility for the whole process of defining and implementing the Agenda, including frames of reference (which should include the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and curricula aligned with that vision and with existing evidence. These should be clear and accessible to caregivers who work directly with children and shared widely with society and families.

The strategy for a sustainable quality vision requires that it be defined on the basis of broad points of consensus and be reinforced by institutional mechanisms unaffected by changes in administration.

We consider the following points **non-negotiable** in regards to quality early childhood education:

- Early childhood must be recognized as a stage of life with its own identity. This means beginning by recognizing children as persons with rights, respecting their perspective and their different paces of development, within the aims of their own culture (in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child).
 - Early childhood programs must guarantee relationships marked by care, love, and protection in the educational space. This means ensuring the presence of caregivers who are sensitive and loving, and capable of listening; ensuring that children are able to develop a sense of belonging; and guaranteeing that they have experiences that allow them to explore and express their emotions.
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- Caregivers must be trained to promote pedagogical interactions that foster curiosity, creativity, imagination, and learning in children.
 - Recognizing the critical role of learning through play to promote children's holistic development. Unlike traditional practices for transmitting information to children – which view children as passive receivers – in learning through play, children have an active role developing skills through social interaction experiences characterized by joy, active engagement, iterative exploration and the construction of meaning.
 - The educational space must have the structural conditions required for quality (classroom size, number of children per group, adult-child ratio, minimum of teacher training, teaching materials) so that children can be healthy and safe, with interactions between adults and children as well as among peers.
 - Families should be supported to promote early childhood learning. This requires providing services to support and strengthen families, as well as promoting interaction between the programs and the families to ensure a collaborative endeavor.

To ensure the sustainability and legitimacy of this recommendation, we advise convening all the actors in education and early childhood care in each country: political actors, service providers, civil society members, other decision-makers, and academics to develop a quality agenda for the country. The above non-negotiable conditions should be the starting point for that agenda; its implementation should adapt our recommendations to the various needs and contexts of each country.

Recommendation 2: Quality Assurance Systems

We propose to Latin American countries that they generate a governance structure or an intersectoral collective body entrusted with quality assurance whose principal functions include designing quality standards for the provision of services that make it possible to guarantee equal learning opportunities that promote the holistic development of all children.

We suggest developing a participatory process for its implementation and sustainability to define standards on the conditions favorable for learning and holistic development, mindful of the various actors in the education and child development system (ministries, agencies, service providers, academics, families, and civil society organizations).

We propose that the first step in building a quality assurance system should be to map supply – both public and private – as well as demand, and current capabilities in each country for implementing those standards, i.e. the feasibility of implementation. At the same time, the standards should ensure continuity and alignment with the educational system and/or educational experience.

It is crucial to consider actions aimed at promoting the conditions needed for implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the standards in the various sectors involved (human resources, infrastructure, regulatory processes, etc.). Consensus-based and well-informed efforts are fundamental for attaining sufficient resources. For example, we suggest governments consider adopting mechanisms and incentives to help early childhood education programs achieve the standards. In addition, a fundamental part of monitoring is providing resources for plans to improve performance.

In order to adapt the process to the current level of progress achieved in each country and available resources, we recommend the following steps. First, we propose putting in place an intersectoral structure based on a mapping of the various players involved in child development. Second, we recommend defining quality service standards. Third, we propose developing plans for implementation that account for support, resources, supply, and the regulatory process. Fourth, we recommend monitoring and evaluating the programs. And fifth, we also recommend implementing a system for monitoring of children's holistic development and learning.

Recommendation 3: Strengthening Families

We call on the countries of the region to strengthen the systems and mechanisms for intersectoral work in each particular sector to promote the quality of life of all families, support their inclusion and social participation, and strengthen their shared responsibility for child development.

The supply of services must start by recognizing that families need different levels of support. Approaches to providing services for families with a focus on early childhood should be defined. Similarly, it is critical to respond to the diversity of families' and children's situations and needs.

We suggest recognizing interculturality and broadening the understanding of family to be more flexible in regards to ethnic, gender and linguistic differences, among others reflecting the diversity in the region. Accordingly, the actions taken need to be adapted to the social norms of each territory and should take into account the need for a sensitive and respectful approach to the culture of each community.

Finally, stakeholders should promote legislative and cultural changes that guarantee families the time and resources necessary for raising children and that make possible an equitable distribution of housework and men's participation in parenting and child-rearing.

We propose to gradually and sustainably implement this recommendation with the following steps. First, define approaches to providing family services focused on early childhood. Second, strengthen institutions that provide services to the different members of families and promote intersectoral work to provide family services. Finally, adopt laws and regulations that make it easier for families to parent and raise children, for which intersectoral work is also crucial.

Recommendation 4: Training Families

We propose to the countries in the region that they develop training programs for families to strengthen their role in the holistic development of children in early childhood. These should include all modalities of services, such as home visits and center-based programs, considering a variety of ways to reach families. The programs should be evidence-based and adapted to the diversity of communities. We also suggest considering not only training but also participation and empowerment to ensure that families have agency.

In this context, community is another area of action, as families from the community become agents of change for other families as a result of sharing social codes, customs, and language. One challenge in this regard is that families need training not only to assume their role in their own households, but also to be able to serve as facilitators for other families in the community.

The following five aspects are critical for developing the programs. One, identifying and including different agents of change who are relevant from the child's perspective, i.e. not only parents, but also other family members involved in child-rearing, or other significant adults. Two, developing specific objectives and content, in addition to well-defined mechanisms to achieve them. Three, creating quality materials aligned with the established objectives. Four, implementing strategies aimed at strengthening the human talent of the caregivers. Five, integrating and establishing strategies for improving the programs based on assessments.

We suggest, with a view to gradually implementing this recommendation, that a review be conducted of evidence on the skills to strengthen among families, and of the relevant content in the area of integral child development. In addition, evidence should be collected from the realities of the different territories and contexts. Next, it is important to design specific programs to attain the expected results. These programs should have objectives, content, and methodology, as well as indicators for monitoring and evaluation. Finally, courses can be offered for families both as parents and as facilitators for other families in the community.

Recommendation 5: Measuring Quality

We propose to the countries in the region that they develop mechanisms to institutionalize measurement of the quality of early childhood education services, bearing in mind that such measurement must be multidimensional and multisectoral, so that there is a focus on improving processes and showing the impact of a wide variety of early childhood programs. We recommend that governments clearly define the objectives of measuring quality, which should include improving the quality of processes and development, thereby contributing to the learning of those children who attend the programs.

We propose that the process of institutionalizing measurement be a participatory one that includes all the relevant actors: policymakers, experts, academics, advocates, providers, directors, educators, and families. It is critical to recognize the diversity of early childhood programs and the contexts in which such education is imparted. Accordingly, we recommend designing a pedagogical strategy for measuring quality in which all actors understand the objectives, methodology, and scope. This would facilitate appreciating measurement in itself as well as understanding and using the results.

We recommend designating an institution to lead and be responsible for the measurement process. We suggest that it be an institution that is not in charge of providing early childhood education so as to ensure an impartial point of view. The sustainability of a measurement system requires that it be recognized and valued by society, that there be a political will to sustain it, and that regulations or legislation be adopted that make it possible for resources to be allocated on an ongoing basis. As for what to measure, we propose going beyond structural standards and including process indicators in the evaluation. Measuring quality has to be articulated with already-existing processes, like indicators of professional development, minimum operational requirements, etc.

We propose the following steps to gradually implement this recommendation: First, develop regulations and laws that establish the objectives and characteristics of measurement, identify the institution in charge and outline any minimum requirements taking account of each country's needs. Second, have a budgetary allocation to ensure the continuity of measurement. Third, determine the contents to be measured through a participatory process to define what and how to measure, as well as the uses to be made of the information. Fourth, create tools and technical support for the professional development of teachers, which should be integrated with initial teacher training. Fifth, design a plan for integral improvement and a multisectoral public agenda to respond to the original objectives of measurement based on the results of the evaluations conducted.

Recommendation 6: Competencies and Certification

We recommend that the countries in the region develop a framework of competencies for those who work with children in early childhood, promoting a continuous and flexible system for training – both pre-service and in-service – and for certification of competencies that strengthens performance of the function. This framework should be included in a pre-service professional training curriculum and also be utilized in a flexible process for certifying competencies that does not depend exclusively on reforming pre-service training programs. In other words, both should be able to operate in a parallel or complementary manner.

In this context, we suggest that the framework of competencies be a reference for training, certifying competencies, and defining the profile of early childhood educators. It should be made up of central and universal pillars for Latin America; and then each country would draw up its own national framework. The following key competencies of the framework for early child development are worth noting: (1) emotional and social development, (2) knowledge of the process of children's neurological, emotional, and physical development, (3) adaptive leadership, (4) ability to use tools focused on generating positive interactions, (5) collaborative relations with parents and adults, and (6) safe and stimulating environments, with cross-cutting lines of creativity, communication, and assertiveness with the aim of providing quality education.

This process requires creating a mechanism for recognizing persons as falling within the broader teaching profession. It may even include the creation of a new job category in the educational workplace to incorporate educators who do not have a university, technical, or advanced degree in education but who are able to certify their skill set in the framework of competencies. This new category would be accompanied by all the rights and benefits of the teaching profession, along with an adequate salary to recognize the essential nature of the profile.

We envision the following steps for gradually implementing this recommendation: First, create a framework of competencies for those who work with children in early childhood to promote a system of training – both initial and continuing – and certification of competencies that is continuous and flexible, and that strengthens the performance of the function. Second, develop profiles for the different roles of early childhood caregivers that are aligned with the framework of competencies. Third, put in place pre-service and in-service teacher education to transform the beliefs and paradigms of people who work with children, which in turn will change their teaching practices and develop their autonomy as educators.

Recommendation 7: Valuing Early Childhood Educators and Caregivers

We suggest to the countries of the region that they promote and instill social awareness regarding the important role of educators and early childhood caregivers. Moreover, they should dignify the work of those adults who work with children in this stage, considering the importance and impact of their performance in the context of quality early childhood education.

Accordingly, we propose to generate and promote processes of social, cultural, and political mobilization in the various countries aimed at recognizing and dignifying the role of educators and caregivers who work with this age group. Factors that should be considered include access to training (quality, minimum standards) and professional salaries. We also believe it would be important to promote the participation of caregivers in decision-making regarding early childhood.

While there is abundant evidence internationally about the relevance and impact of investment in educators and early childhood caregivers. Few studies have been conducted and little evidence has been collected at a regional and local level. Therefore, investing in the education and training of quality educators and caregivers is of the utmost importance.

We suggest the following three stages to ensure the sustainability and legitimacy of this recommendation. First, identify and generate evidence on the effectiveness of quality pedagogical practices and interactions for early childhood, highlighting examples from Latin America. Second, translate the evidence, documents, and knowledge found into a simple and accessible format for all. Third, raise social awareness through campaigns and actions by governments and civil society.

Recommendation 8: Forum for Regional Exchange

We recommend that international organizations, governments in the region, academics, and civil society members create a forum for regional coordination and dialogue to help share knowledge and adopt frames of reference that inform public policies in the countries with the aim of ensuring quality services and reducing inequalities in early childhood.

This forum should include a platform for sharing information useful to early childhood policymakers at all levels in the public sector and administrators in the non-state sector, as well as committees that hold periodic meetings, sustained over time, to address specific issues with a continuing working agenda. The specific issues that should be discussed are: (i) Valuing workers in early childhood education, fostering social awareness about their role as professionals; (ii) Frameworks of competencies for personnel who work with early childhood (educators and caregivers, among others); (iii) Characteristics of the quality assurance systems, and the dimensions they should include; and, (iv) Measurement of the quality of early childhood education services.

We suggest that the proposals that emerge from this space should serve as a guide and incentive for the countries to adopt this agenda. In addition, the forum should have outputs that can be applied practically in the countries and take account of the region's diversity.

We suggest gradual implementation with four elements: First, that the different players from the different sectors of the education system, government, civil society, experts, academia, and providers, among others, be convened to participate in the regional space, and ensure they have a permanent presence in it. Second, form committees to work on the specific issues, already mentioned, with a common agenda that establishes the meetings and respective issues, as well as follow-up. Third, develop a platform for the exchange of information, both for regular meetings held from time to time and for presenting working papers or reports that provide feedback to the committees. Finally, develop different products with strategies for regional dissemination.

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NOTAS

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