

**BACKGROUND CONCEPTUAL NOTE**

**CONFERENCE**

**BEYOND CHILD INDICATORS:**

**A FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS AND EVALUATE THE  
QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES AND PROGRAMS  
IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS**

**NYU Abu Dhabi Institute  
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## ***Introduction***

Fueled by the twin thrusts of economic and program evaluation sciences, children's early years of development are emerging as a public policy focus around the world. Economic evidence conveys the importance of "investing early" (Heckman & Krueger, 2003); investments in early childhood are increasingly seen as the first step beyond child survival efforts in an education-and family-based approach to addressing poverty and inequality. Simultaneously, program evaluation data has cogently demonstrated that quality ECCE programs can make a difference for short- and long-term outcomes (ACF, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Early childhood services and programs (ECS) may be one of the most promising approaches to alleviating poverty for the next generation of children in the developing world (Engle et al., 2007; Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; Heckman & Cunha, 2007; Ulkuer, 2006).

*Education for All* Goal #1 -- to expand early childhood care and education -- is one of the key drivers of ECCE programming globally and the *Health for all* declaration (Alma Ata, 1978) of primary care. A majority of the indicators, designed to measure progress toward the goals of these frameworks, focus on expansion and access to ECS, with mixed results reported in the achievement of these indicators and improvements in children's outcomes (UNESCO, 2006; Yoshikawa et al., 2007). With respect to the EFA goals, these preliminary findings suggest that program expansion, in the absence of targeted efforts to improve quality, is a limited strategy for achieving the overall goal of this education framework, namely holistic early childhood development. It is critical for nations to move from first-generation questions, regarding whether to invest in ECS, to second-generation questions about how to improve its quality to ensure success for children and families.

Research shows that only programs of sufficient quality, as indicated by cultural appropriateness, staff skills, intensity and duration, and features of the physical and social environment of programs, have the potential to increase cognitive and socio-emotional skills in the long term. Many studies indicate, however, that EC programs are not likely to positively affect the quality and content of adult interaction and stimulation of children's development (by both early childhood educators/caregivers and parents/family members), and ultimately children's well-being, unless they are of sufficient quality and intensity (National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation, 2007). Dimensions of EC program quality identified in several developed countries as central to child outcome goals include safety and adequacy of physical environments, the nature of teacher- or caregiver-child interactions, the pedagogical and content knowledge of staff, staff education and training, and a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple domains of family and child functioning (ACF, 2002; LaParo, Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Howes et al., 2008; Love et al., 2003; Pence, 2008). Thus, the improvement of quality in early childhood (EC) programs is an urgent international issue, particularly as an increasing number of countries expand access to ECS (UNESCO, 2006).

This nascent, albeit growing, attention to quality highlights the abyss in understanding and measuring the quality of early learning and development environments in countries that are moving towards expanding and scaling up ECS. The predominant approach to measuring and monitoring program quality currently consists of conducting child assessments and reporting aggregated data at the program, local, regional, or national levels (Brienbauer, 2008; Guhn, Janus, & Hertzman, 2007). Most of these efforts have been

carried out for policy advocacy purposes, rather than program evaluation or quality improvement. In our view, while important, this is a limited approach to examining quality. It does not provide information concerning what is required to support implementation, fidelity, or steps that could be taken to improve quality across communities or regions. Often, no measures specific to program quality are included as program performance indicators—there is pressure and an inclination to only focus on and gather information on children’s outcomes. This approach does little beyond providing information about whether or not a given program “worked,” thereby contributing almost nothing to program improvement goals and public policy. The lack of program quality data has hampered an understanding of what quality characteristics of programs in the developing world make a difference in children’s outcomes and what aspects programs should be promoting and investing in as strategies for ensuring that young children achieve their developmental potential.

In addition, developing nations often have limited capacity to support quality improvement of ECS and few resources to conduct program evaluation and measure program quality and progress toward intermediate and long-term outcomes (Myers, 2006b; Pence, 2008). Most programs also do not have the luxury of longitudinal evaluations. Guidance for measurement of program quality and family and child development outcomes in the service of evaluating early childhood care and education initiatives is lacking. Therefore, EC programs are seeking viable short-term tools to assess program quality and impact on young children’s holistic learning and development. Yet tools for assessing early childhood services and settings, and the processes for embedding them in local, regional, and national evaluation systems, are lacking. Measurement has primarily focused on indicators of child development for national and international purposes (UNICEF, 2008). The proposed conference aims to develop a participatory framework and process for countries in the majority world to achieve the second-generation aim of ensuring quality in early childhood.

### *Aim*

The aim of the proposed conference is to develop a conceptual framework and set of guidelines for the measurement and assessment of EC program quality in global contexts. In addition, indicators and tools for assessing and improving program quality will be assembled. Given the lack of existing information to build such a framework and the implications for use with a global audience, the conference brings together a consortium of key stakeholders, including representatives from international development agencies, regional networks, national-level practitioners, researchers, and academics, to develop an EC program quality measurement framework. The conference uses a participatory approach, including non-Western and majority world consultations, rooted in ecological models that emphasize the importance of context in determining dimensions and characteristics of quality.

This conference will set the stage for three future phases of work, including (1) the creation of a set of guidelines to inform measurement practices, (2) a tested compendium of measurement tools individual countries might select from to meet their accountability and program improvement goals, and (3) actual implementation of the guidelines and compendium in a small set of low-income countries.

In preparation for the conference, this discussion document is being circulated as an initial point for deliberations, reflections and considerations of key issues in understanding, defining and measuring quality EC programs and services.

### ***Guiding Principles for the Development of the Quality Measurement Framework***

For the conference and ensuing work leading to the measurement of quality framework and tools, the following principles will serve as a guide:

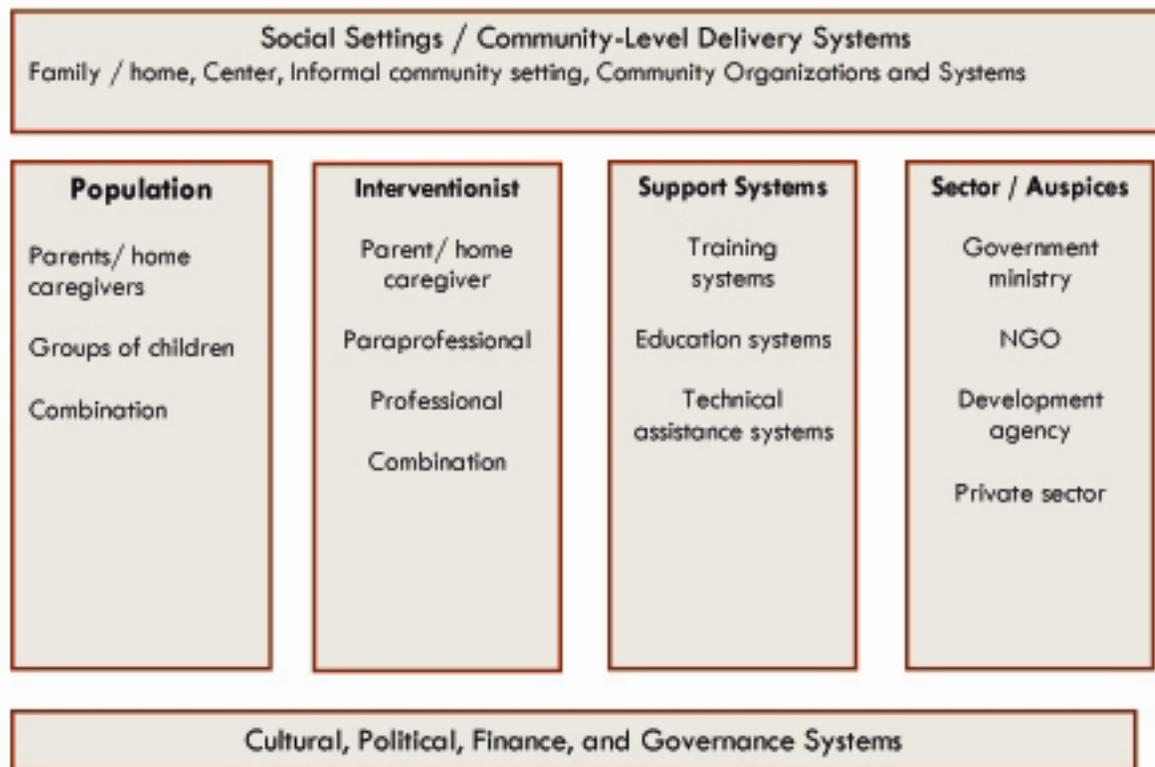
1) *Definition of Quality.* Quality in ECS is both multi-dimensional and context-specific. Despite some common underlying principles of human development, the definition of quality varies across regions, cultures and populations (Myers, 2006a, 2006b). In the proposed meeting, discussions will consider the diversity of the specific domains and aspects of development that countries want to have their children achieve, know, and be able to do (Kagan & Britto, 2007), moving beyond the traditional domains of school readiness to include aspects of rights, citizenry, and moral development.

2) *Process of Development.* The process for defining, measuring, and assessing quality will ensure that a wide range of stakeholders are involved in an iterative process of revision and refinement. The guidelines and framework will be enriched with case examples from several countries showing different ways of implementing such a national process. It should be noted that the process for this work is rooted in the ethos of bringing together a consortium of international academic and development (e.g., the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Developments [CGECCD]; UNICEF; World Bank) and regional partners (e.g., Arab Resource Collective (ARC), Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), International Center for Education and Human Development, and Practitioners and academics are at the national level.

3) *Quality Intervention Approaches.* Changes in the quality and availability of services children and parents receive and the environments they experience are primarily driven by changes in how adults interact with children and enrich their lives. Across and within countries there is tremendous diversity in the types of settings for ECS, e.g., within the home, at a center or school, at informal or formal community setting. Within these settings there is diversity in the target recipient of the services, the adult, i.e., parents/caregivers, child care providers, health and other service providers, and relatives/friends who care for children and the child or groups of children (or often even a combination). The literature differentiates quality on dimensions of the setting and dimensions of the interaction. In order to arrive at a measurement model for capturing quality, we rely on these two broad dimensions to explore quality. Implicated however, in the settings and interactions are the most proximal factors associated with the interventionist (caregiver, paraprofessional or professional), at a more distal level are the systems that support the interventionists and at the most distal level is the auspices under which the service is provided (e.g., government program; NGO service, faith-based center). The broadest paradigm that affects quality is the Cultural, Political, Finance, and Governance Systems (See Figure 1). If the settings and interactions children experience are not enhanced then the ultimate outcomes targeted by ECD programs and interventions, i.e., children's well-being and readiness for school and life are compromised. Therefore, while the focus of measuring quality

lies in exploring the dimensions of setting and interactions, the path for getting there is diverse and includes many different levels of factors and influences. While all these dimensions and the plethora of program models that fall into the categories will be considered (UNESCO, 2007), the child and adult targets of EC interventions and the interventionists who work to implement them will be used as the guiding criteria for this initiative, for several reasons. The primary focus of this conference is measurement of quality. Measurement issues vary less by the sponsoring agency, to some extent by location and services, but largely by the target or recipient of EC services. Programs that directly intervene with parents and the home environment are often conceptualized separately from those targeting child and center based care. This conceptualization of the adult or child target of intervention by type interventionist allows exploration of both the commonalities and differences among EC program models and theories of action. Therefore, we use these categories as the guiding markers for discussing and conceptualizing program services and the resulting measurement framework. By using this conceptualization, we seek to be as comprehensive as possible in covering the targets and theories of action used in most programs and service delivery approaches supported by the majority of intervention developers and sponsoring agencies involved in ECS.

Figure 1: Guiding Framework for ECD Quality  
[quality can be assessed within boxes or across adjacent boxes, in their interactions]



4) *Options Oriented*. The guidelines and framework will outline core choices regarding conceptual and methodological approaches. With respect to conceptual approaches that take into account country-specific conditions, quality from minimal to maximum standards will be discussed. Given that countries have different quality needs, the conceptual options will strive to provide clearer choices depending on country-level needs. With respect to methodology, the conference will consider qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches to assessing quality; the testing of pilot instruments against a range of EC contexts and programs within a country; and longitudinal data collection to evaluate change.

5) *Variation in Use*. The multiple purposes of assessment and evaluation, including program improvement, scalability, certification, sustainability, and impact evaluation, will be highlighted. Such a measurement framework could be used in a variety of ways towards system-building for evaluation and assessment of quality, including as a tool for community and national planning of ECS, for advocacy for quality programming, and to guide quality teaching and instructional practices. A cardinal rule, though, that will not be violated is that measures should “do no harm” and not be misused.

### *The Conference*

The paramount need in measuring program quality is to understand the concept of quality. Quality has been defined primarily based on more western conceptualizations in high-income country contexts. The diversity in cultural expectations, country resources and ECS necessitated the development of a measurement system that is applicable and relevant to the context to which it is applied. It is anticipated that quality measurement needs will be complex, requiring multiple perspectives and cultural approaches for the development of a responsive quality assessment framework. Therefore, defining the aspects of program quality from comparative, multinational, and global perspectives are essential first steps. Consequently, the approach of this initiative is participatory and inclusive of multiple perspectives and wide representation. The three-day proposed conference will provide an opportunity for the development of a draft conceptual framework and guidelines for measurement of quality.

### **Proposed Conference Agenda**

**DAY 0: MONDAY, APRIL 12**

**WELCOME RECEPTION 8:30PM – 10:30PM**

**LIGHT REFRESHMENTS TO BE SERVED IN HOTEL LOBBY**

**DAY 1: TUESDAY, APRIL 13 (8:30 TO 5:00)**

**OPENING SESSION** Imperative of Quality for ECS – global and regional perspective

**BREAK** (tea, coffee)

**PANEL 1:** Conceptual Framework for Improving the Quality of ECS: Global perspectives.

**LUNCH**

### **WORKING GROUPS ON QUALITY ACROSS ECS APPROACHES & SETTINGS**

Conference participants will meet in two pre-assigned groups to allow conference attendees to

- (i) share their definitions of the range of settings within which quality can be measured in the two ECD approaches;
- (ii) share some key dimensions of what could be considered quality in programs that focus on a) interventionists and parents / caregivers; and b) interventionists and groups of children.

“Interventionists” are change agents who implement the particular ECD program, and can be paraprofessionals, paid staff, or in some cases parents or relatives of the young child.

- **Working group 1A (i & ii)** Focuses on ECS approaches that target quality in the relationship and interactions between interventionist and parent / primary caregiver (could be delivered in any setting, e.g., in or out of the home).
- **Working group 1B (i & ii)** Considers ECS approaches that target quality in the relationship, educational process, and interactions between interventionist and groups of children (could be delivered in any setting, e.g., in or out of the home).

**BREAK** tea, coffee

### **PANEL 2: REPORT BACK: TOWARDS A SHARED DEFINITION**

Panelists: Rapporteurs from the four working groups

In this panel, descriptive overviews of the range of ECCE approaches and settings across nations and regions will be provided, integrating discussion and issues raised in working groups.

FORMAL DINNER Provided (Location TBD)

### **DAY 2: WEDNESDAY, APRIL 14(7:45 – 8:00 PM)**

Day 2 will incorporate dimensions of quality in ECCE focused on 1) approaches targeting interventionists and groups of children; and 2) approaches targeting interventionists and parents / caregivers; and 3) structural features of ECD programs.

**SESSION 2.1: ECD Approaches Targeting Interventionists and Groups of Children –**  
2 paper presentations on measurement and intervention followed by plenary Q &A.

BREAK (tea, coffee)

### **WORKING GROUPS 2.2 ON INTERVENTIONISTS & CHILDREN**

Four Working Groups with assigned Rapporteurs

**PLENARY DISCUSSION 2.3**

Working Groups Rapporteurs Report and discussion

**LUNCH**

**SESSION 2.4: ECD Approaches Targeting Interventionist and Parent / Primary Caregiver**

2 Paper Presentations on measurement and intervention followed by plenary Q & A.

BREAK (tea, coffee)

**WORKING GROUPS 2.5 ON INTERVENTIONISTS AND ADULTS**

Four Working Groups with assigned Rapporteurs

**PLENARY DISCUSSION 2.6**

Working Groups Rapporteurs report and discussion

GROUP BUS DEPARTURE TO PUBLIC LECTURE LOCATION – AL MAMOURA (5:15PM)

BUFFET STYLE RECEPTION

**KEYNOTE PUBLIC LECTURE (7:00pm)**

“Investments in Early Childhood: What Programs In The Majority World Can Tell Us”

Nurper Ulkuer, Ph.D.

UNICEF

**DAY 3: THURSDAY, APRIL 15 (7:15 – 2:00)**

**SESSION 3.1: EMERGING THEMES (From previous day discussions)**

**SESSION 3.2: Structural Features of ECD Settings**

This session will focus on the structural aspects of quality across settings with an emphasis on environmental sustainability, disaster preparedness and response and safety issues

Paper Presentations

Discussant Comments

Plenary Session

BREAK (tea, coffee)

**SESSION 3.3: Systems Building and Professional Development**

This session will focus on the broader systems that can bring about improvements at scale in quality at the setting level: governing agencies, sectors, NGO's, education institutions, community grassroots efforts.

Paper Presentations

Discussant Comments  
Plenary Session

**CLOSING SESSION: NEXT STEPS IN QUALITY MEASUREMENT**

**LUNCH**

**Dinner Option @ Hotel (7pm – 9pm)**

***In Preparation of the Conference***

In preparation for the three-day conference, participants are asked to prepare a brief written paper. Details on the paper topic, format and timelines are being shared individually with the participants. All papers will be shared in advance of the conference. It is expected that all participants will review these background papers and the conceptual note.

***Proposed Conference Outcomes***

The following outcomes are expected from the conference:

- (i) Discussion document on the dimensions of program quality linked with child outcomes;
- (ii) A publication on the papers presented at the conference with attached commentaries emanating also from the conference proceedings and participant comments.

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