A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES FOR CHILDREN FROM 3 TO 10 YEARS OF AGE

Documentation Study on ISSA's Work on Quality Improvement

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Documentation Study on ISSA's Work on Quality Improvement

INTERNATIONAL
STEP by STEP
ASSOCIATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has been a long, rich and insightful journey to get to this moment of sharing the documentation study on ISSA's work on quality improvement. None of this would have been possible without a collective and sustained effort, long-term commitment, network support and the strong belief that change can happen, even if it requires time. There are many who contributed to it!

We would like first to thank all the experts within and outside the network who contributed to the development of the *Competent Educators for the 21st Century - Principles of Quality Pedagogy*, the foundational resource on which the entire *Quality Resource Pack (QRP)* has been built. The document soundly captures the key values for which ISSA stands in its approach to quality pedagogy in preschool and primary school, and inspired all of us to find and learn about meaningful ways in which theory can be translated into practice, and practice can influence theory.

A warm thank you goes to all experts and practitioners from different countries in the ISSA network who in the past six years contributed to the development of all resources in the *ISSA Quality Resource Pack*. We thank them for their time, their expertise, their insightful contributions, comments and reflections, and for their critical role in bridging early childhood theory and practice. Same gratitude goes to the group of ISSA Reliability Coordinators, many of whom are co-authors of the resources, who regularly met to check the reliability of using the instruments from the QRP, and who organized meetings in all countries of ISSA-licensed members to ensure proper understanding and use of the instruments.

Many thanks go to all ISSA members licensed to use the QRP, for their persistent dedication to providing quality services to all children and to professionalism in early years services in their countries, and for their restless efforts to support and to learn from practitioners' experience, so that better ways for supporting them are conceptualized and enabled. We would like to thank them for contributing so much to the learning about quality in the ISSA network through sharing and dialoguing about their work, through supporting and inspiring each other.

We express our great appreciation and gratitude to Open Society Foundations' Early Childhood Program, especially to Sarah Klaus, for the generous financial support over the years for developing all ISSA's resources on Quality, for their investment in supportive network activities aimed at increased capacity of members to work towards quality improvement, and for being a source of inspiration in strategically approaching ISSA's work on quality in such a large and diverse region. Without their support, none of the accomplishments would have been possible.

Special thanks go to Dawn Tankersley, our long-standing Program Consultant, and Tatjana Vonta, former director of the Step by Step Center for Quality in Education, an ISSA member organization in Slovenia, both of whom have been pivotal in developing this documentation study. Their high expertise and in-depth understanding of ISSA's and members' work on quality over the years have been essential in capturing and reflecting critically on the wealth of data collected.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The power of early childhood education and care (ECEC) interventions in transforming the lives of very young children is highly dependent on the quality of the services provided. More recently, evidence has increased the focus on the value of *process quality* as determinant of the outcomes.

This study documents ISSA's work on process quality improvement to support member organisations in their efforts to contribute to systemic and professional changes in their respective countries. A concrete set of resources, tools and mechanisms – the ISSA's *Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and its *Quality Resource Pack* – supports the members to promote inclusive quality practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children aged 3 to 10.

This study was commissioned to learn how much the resources and the support provided to ISSA members managed to determine new approaches, new practices and influence new policies. Equally important was being able to share the learning journey of ISSA both as a learning community and as a reflexive network which deeply believes in the co-construction of knowledge, transnational networks of support, nurturing innovation and empowering agents of change.

The structure of this study consists of four parts. Parts I and II provide the conceptual framework and the contextual background for the development of the ISSA's work on quality improvement in ECEC. Part 3 is the core of the study, presenting the main findings of ISSA members' use of the QRP and its influence on ECEC practice and policy. Part 4 summarizes the lessons learned.

PART 1 – A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING ON QUALITY

- Part 1 describes the conceptual framework under which ISSA's work on quality improvement and this documentation study was established. For more than 20 years, the ISSA network has operated at different levels under the notion of *competent systems* which work interactively and holistically to enable change in promoting quality services to children and their families. The formal conceptual framework emerged in the European Commission's 2011 report, *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe Report)*. Although the CoRe Report was published many years after the beginning of the ISSA network implementation processes, it supports and reinforces ISSA's methodological approach.

- The CoRe Report identifies four levels of competences in the ECEC system, whereby each level of the system is interdependent on the other levels. The four competence levels are at the individual, the institutional, the inter-institutional and the governance and policy levels. By interacting so as to maximise each level's competences, the entire system has stronger final outcomes. Developing competences at each level requires engaging in level-specific activities guided by a common vision and shared values, with the shared understanding of greater cooperation, support and engagement both within and across levels.

PART 2 – ONE STEP AT A TIME … (CO-)CONSTRUCTING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF AND WORK ON QUALITY

- ISSA was created in 1999 as a collaborative network of non-governmental organisations implementing the Step by Step (SbS) Programme in Central Eastern European countries and former Soviet Union countries, wishing to join forces for national and international advocacy to promote the importance of early-years services for all children, especially the most vulnerable. Part 2 of this study describes the historical context within which ISSA's work on Quality unfolded.

- The central element of this study – the Quality Resources Pack (QRP) – emerged in 2010 enabling a systemic approach to quality improvement anchored in international research and practice in ECEC. Aimed to serve a diverse set of the stakeholders, the QRP can be used in different ways to engage in intra- and inter-sectoral and multi-level dialogue at the individual, institutional, national and international levels. The QRP is a set of resources and tools that build the foundation for these discussions around the definition and practice of Quality in ECEC services.

ISSA Principles of *Quality Pedagogy* – A quality framework for preschool and primary school professionals

Roads to Quality **– A guidebook for pre- and in-service training providers**

Assessment Instrument
Tool for educators, pedagogical coordinators, supervisors

Putting Knowledge into Practice **– A guidebook for educators and mentors**

Professional Development Tool
Tool for educators, mentors, pre- and in-service training providers

Online Video Library
Tool for educators, pedagogical coordinators, pre-service training providers

Advocating for Quality
Leaflets for educators, parents and decision makers

Figure *1 The Quality Resource Pack*

PART 3 – TIME FOR DOCUMENTING AND REFLECTING ON OUR WORK ON QUALITY

- Part 3 brings together the findings from this in-depth exploration of the impact of many years of scaffolding and net-working around quality improvement work.

- The study was conducted in two phases. Through desk-based research, an online survey of 25 licensed ISSA members, and 13 guided interviews of ISSA members, the first phase aimed to document, analyse and describe the variety of approaches to QRP implementation across settings and countries. Findings from this phase identified the challenges and obstacles on using the resources in the QRP, as well as their impact on quality improvement. The second phase of the study consisted of in-depth data collection from four ISSA members in Armenia, Croatia, Moldova and Slovenia

through country visits, interviews, focus groups, and showcases the Kosovo experience in order to obtain a greater understanding of the QRP impact on competences at all levels of the ECEC system.

The study found that:

- The general objective to develop a systemic approach to quality improvement at all four levels of the ECEC system, with a particular emphasis on the creation of a sustainable and participatory dialogue around quality, was attained.

- More than 80% of the surveyed members said that they received government support for the work they were doing around quality assurance, and that the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and the QRP were recognised at the national level as a useful and practical set of tools. Whether or not quality improvement is the organisation's major activity focus, the QRP resources are useful in engaging other stakeholders in their work.

- Across the 25 members, many of the resources available in the QRP have been translated and used for a diverse set of activities, including pre- and in-service training, reliability meetings[1], professional learning communities, mentoring, monitoring, promoting the profession, and research. The audiences varied according to each activity and consisted of a broad group of ECEC stakeholders, including pre- and in-service ECEC professionals, teaching assistants, school managers, parents, university staff, supervisors, policy makers, governmental officials, donors and researchers.

The study also examined the influence of the QRP at the four levels of the ECEC system.

- At the *individual level*, the QRP seems to have been mostly used for professional training (25 members), mentoring processes (20 members) and monitoring teacher practices (19 members). A third of the members stated that the QRP implementation had made a very large impact on professional practices. Some resources in the QRP were also cited as effective tools for supporting self-assessment and group assessments processes, monitoring and support.

- At the *institutional level*, 15 of the 25 members found that the QRP supported professional learning communities, engaging in observation of practice and practice improvements. Eleven members stated that by using the QRP, they had made a positive impact on institutional leadership and management practices, including a focus on greater empowerment and democratic inclusion of the educators' voices. The use of resources in the QRP also fostered greater support for educators for embracing diversity and the inclusion of vulnerable children and their families in ECEC services.

- At the *inter-institutional level*, the use of the resources in the QRP enabled an increased level of inter-sectoral connectivity among professionals working in the ECEC system. Building a shared understanding of quality – with the ability to provide supporting resources in cross-institutional learning communities, for example – was found to be useful in building an integrated approach at this level. Partnerships with funders, government education agencies and pre-service education institutions also evolved as a result of using the QRP, albeit to varying degrees of interest and success.

- In terms of influencing the *governance and policy level*, the study found that members appreciated the value of the QRP resources to support their advocacy and policy-related work at the national level, albeit with varying degrees of influence depending on the area of work. The data suggest that both the promoted approach and the use of QRP resources directly contributed to policy changes in some countries. For example, two countries (Albania and Kosovo) adopted national standards aligned with *the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy*, and 17 countries improved policymakers' understanding of quality ECEC services. Nonetheless, the use of QRP implementation data for research purposes and the development of evidence for advocacy material could be improved.

1 – The reliability meetings were aimed at ensuring a shared and deep understanding of the Quality Principles and Indicators among members. These meetings have been organized annually from 2010 to 2013 on the level of the network, where 11 ISSA Reliability Coordinators (experts from member organizations in the network) used the Professional Development Tool and the Assessment Instrument to engage in observations and interviews with teachers in preschool and primary school settings, and in discussions with their peers to check the reliability of their scoring. Every year the inter-rater reliability among coordinators in using the tools was tested. Furthermore, through country visits to all members, the ISSA Reliability Coordinators were hosted by member organizations to facilitate meetings with local reliability coordinators. The meetings were aimed at ensuring both a shared and profound understanding on the principles and indicators, and a reliable use of the tools at the local level.

PART 4 – WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED AS AN INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FROM WORKING ON QUALITY?

By linking theory with practice in the context of quality improvement, the QRP resources provide a rich body of evidence for thinking about the role of an international network in enabling change in different ECEC systems. Part 4 examines this question, with a focus on the national conditions and member characteristics which have impacted the successful implementation of the QRP.

- Several supporting factors – such as strong, expert and connected members as well as the versatility of the QRP resources – stood out regarding the successful use and implementation of the QRP resources. The study also identified general challenges and roadblocks across the ECEC systems in many countries, most notably the lack of government support for ECEC services, insufficient funding for sustainable work activities, and the dedicated time commitment needed to enact systemic change.

- The QRP was found to be a versatile package that could be used in different ways by a diverse set of stakeholders. Outcomes are dependent on the political and economic context as well as the ISSA members' capacity and working relationships with educational government entities.

- The value of the ISSA network in the engagement of two-way learning – between individual member organisations in Europe and Central Asia and the international network – was of prime importance for both the knowledge creation illustrated by the development of the QRP resources and their implementation. Member organisations benefit from their ISSA membership in terms of the credibility received within their countries as well as the existing space for cross-national peer support and learning exchange. Additionally, ISSA gains in time and investment by listening to members and understanding how to better influence practice in the ECEC system. This bottom-up approach has proved invaluable to the development of quality practices across the ECEC system in the diverse ISSA community.

- The implementation of the QRP created policy-level benefits from its ground-level work, by becoming a mechanism for influencing and enabling change in ECEC policy at the governance and policy level. The broad audience targeted by the QRP resources facilitates the diffusion of research-based evidence and practices related to quality at levels which can influence processes such as teacher training and supervision. This continuous, rich exchange of activities at the country level has enabled ISSA to use this field-based evidence in regional and international policy fora.

This study is a learning experience for the ISSA community and beyond. The concept of quality is continuously evolving, and remains in a place where practice, research and policy meet and inform each other. Quality definitions will continuously evolve with evidence-based research, outlining new understandings about children, families, professionals, services and communities. Quality processes will adapt with increasingly complex and challenging environments, and social, economic and political challenges. The work is never finished. New evidence, resources and knowledge can be added for advancing our work and enriching our approach.

We remain committed to sharing experiences and gathering evidence for reflection, and welcome this on-going challenge to improve the quality of ECEC services for children and families.

WHY THIS PUBLICATION?

A FEW REASONS:

- To document the work carried out in the ISSA network on improving the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and on contributing to building up competent ECEC systems through a bottom-up approach.
- To further strengthen the learning about process quality improvement in the network and beyond
- To showcase how important it is to have a systemic and well-articulated approach to process quality and support it through varying mechanisms.
- To share the strengths, challenges and learnings in using the resources at different levels in ECEC systems.
- To showcase the power of a reflexive network to influence systems.
- To inspire other organizations committed to quality improvement to pursue systemic changes.

ISSA[2] is an association of member organizations from multiple countries that unites professionals and partners to deliver high-quality early-years services equitably. As a regional network of professionals stretching from Europe to Central Asia, ISSA is committed to contributing both globally to the knowledge in the early childhood field and locally to advancing the early childhood agenda in countries through the work of its members.

Tapping into the strengths and expertise of its network, ISSA has mobilized the talents and efforts of staff, members and partners to create enabling resources aimed at influencing practices and policies in countries, while relying on a strong body of evidence informed by research.

In 2009, ISSA developed a Quality Framework called Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy which proposed a definition of process quality in preschools and primary schools. Consequently, ISSA has developed and disseminated an entire resource pack to assist its members in their efforts to promote inclusive, high-quality practices in early childhood education programs in their respective countries, acknowledging that competent early childhood practitioners have to be supported by competent early childhood systems. The ISSA Quality Resource Pack (QRP) is a collection of resources and tools that build the foundation for discussions at multiple levels around what quality practices entail. The documents were designed and developed through the collaboration and participation of members, and their use has been reinforced through capacity-building meetings and peer-support activities.

The purpose of this study is to document the work carried out in the ISSA network on improving the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and on contributing to building up competent ECEC systems through a bottom-up approach – starting from the interventions and activities of ISSA's members (all of them non-governmental organizations) in their respective countries. The study also aims to illustrate how the usage of the QRP contributed to the acquisition of different competences at the individual/team, institution, inter-institutional, and policy and governance levels in different political and economic country contexts, and to inspire future strategies in various countries for contributing to the development of competent ECEC systems.

An additional purpose of this publication is to provide ISSA (and other international networks) with the opportunity to reflect on the value of international frameworks and tools like ISSA's Principles of Quality Pedagogy and its enabling Quality Resource Pack (QRP), to determine changes at different levels in country systems. Equally important, though, is to learn about the factors that have confirmed or limited the leverage of the very diverse international learning and collaborative community of ISSA as regards creating and sustaining change on the local level.

As a reflexive network, we want to better understand: where our role as a network is most needed and has most relevance; which are the avenues that create pathways for sustainable changes; and how we can continuously nurture the critical thinking and dialogue among professionals towards contributing to an early childhood paradigm and discourse loyal to the child and her/his family and to the professionals working with them.

2 For more information about ISSA: www.issa.nl

PART 1 | A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING ON QUALITY

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

This first chapter introduces you briefly to the conceptual framework of the *competent early childhood system* on which this documentation study has been based. It unpacks the competences for each of the four levels of the system – individual, institutional, inter-institutional, and governance and policy level – to better contextualize the systemic view on addressing quality in early childhood when reflecting on ISSA's work.

The chapter provides policy makers, researchers, pre- and in-service professionals, supervisors and practitioners with an overview of the core competencies needed to promote and maintain both process and structural quality in early childhood services.

In the third chapter, the findings will summarize how the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy and the Quality Resource Pack have contributed, through the work of ISSA members, to building competences at each level in the system.

KEY MESSAGES

- Every child's well-being should always be in focus in order to reach maximum potential.

- Building competent systems that promote high-quality early childhood experiences for young children and their families is crucial and should take into account both structural and process quality.

- ISSA's focus on process quality over the last twenty years has been reflected in ISSA's Principles of Quality Pedagogy, the core and fundamental document of ISSA's Quality Resource Pack.

- Teachers make a difference, but they cannot do so without the support of a competent system.

- Competences on different levels of the systems are different, but they complement and build on each other and need to be addressed simultaneously.

GOVERNANCE AND POLICY LEVEL
Universal Access
Monitoring, Evaluation and Research
Child and Family Centered Curricula
Workforce Policies
Resources
Inter-institutional Policies

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL
Shared Vision
Leadership
Professional Development
Quality Delivery
Communication

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL
Shared Vision and Inclusive Culture
Communities of Practice
Shared Leadership
Collaborative Management

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL
Observe
Reflect
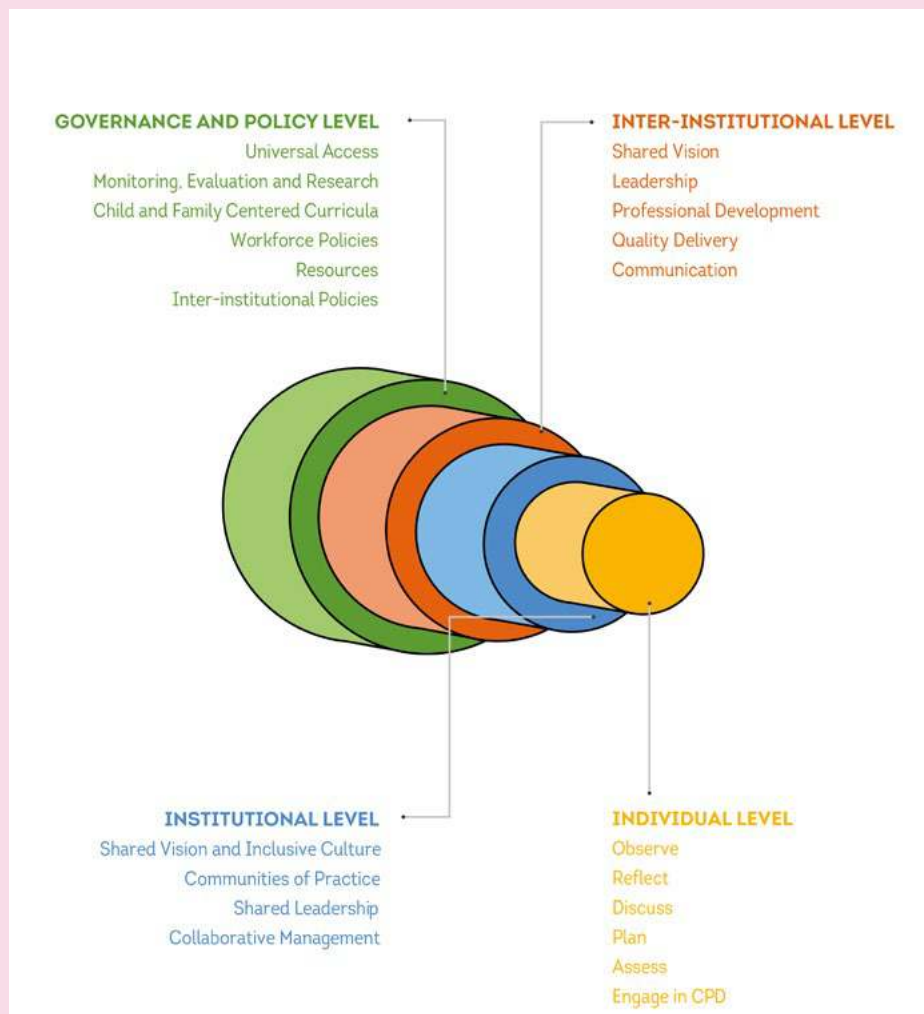Discuss
Plan
Assess
Engage in CPD

Figure 2 *Competences at different levels in the system*

ISSA believes that the main goal of any work related to early education is to promote every child's well-being, development, and learning in order to reach their full potential. ISSA also believes that this cannot be achieved without a focus on developing competent systems that promote high-quality early childhood experiences for young children and their families. However, quality experiences can only be achieved when both structural and process quality are present (European Commission, 2014).

The European Commission's (2014) document, *Proposal for a Quality Framework on Early Childhood Education and Care* states that process quality examines practices within an ECEC setting including:

- relationships between ECEC providers and children's families;

- relationships between staff and children, and among children;

- the extent to which care and education is provided in an integrated way, and

- the day-to-day pedagogic practice of staff within an ECEC context.

The ISSA Network's work over the last twenty years has focused on process quality and supporting the ECEC workforce to focus, understand, reflect and make changes in educational practice through training, mentoring, coaching, building partnerships and working in professional learning communities. Process quality has been at the core of its work since the beginning, with the belief that pedagogy stays at the heart of education. This is reflected in ISSA's Principles of Quality Pedagogy, but is equally and strongly supported by the European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (EC, 2014) which refers to both process and structural quality.

Early childhood staff are critical to universally accessible, high-quality early childhood education (ECEC) provision. Initial training, as well as on-going professional development, adequate support, recognition and working conditions have positive impacts on ECEC staff's capacity, motivation and practices with young children, and thus children's development and well-being (European Commission, 2014; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazarri, & Van Laere, 2011).

1.1 QUALITY AND THE COMPETENT ECEC SYSTEMS

GOVERNANCE AND POLICY LEVEL

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

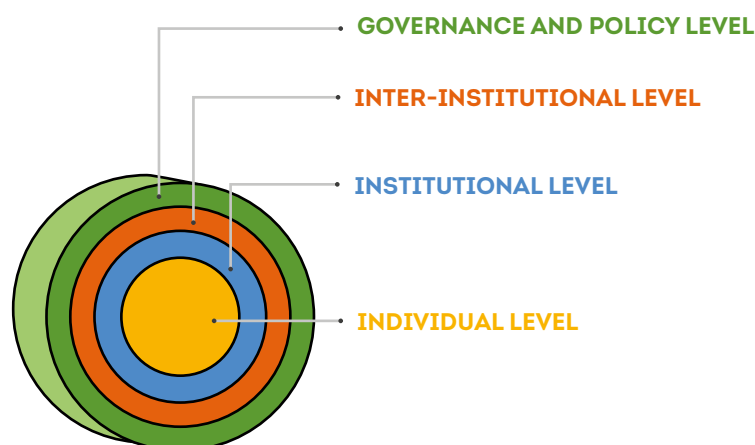**Figure 3** *Levels of the competent systems*

The European Commission report, *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe Report)* (Urban et al., 2011) points out that practitioner/teacher competences (defined as knowledge, skills, and values) that best support children's holistic development in ECEC programmes are developed and supported within competent institutions and com-

petent systems. A key finding of the CoRe Report is that 'competence' in the early childhood education and care context has to be understood as a characteristic of the entire early childhood system. The competent system develops through reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context (ibid, p. 21).

Although quality educators can make a difference for children in any kind of environment, they best thrive in environments where their colleagues and institution's leaders support them through collaborative management and participatory leadership, building strong communities of practice, and shared vision/inclusive climates (Pianta et al., 2014; Sheridan et al., 2009). Likewise, institutions can best support teachers when they have a shared vision of quality and strong leadership, professional development opportunities, communication between other institutions with which they interface, and the delivery of quality services. In addition, competences at all levels are best supported when there are effective policies for working inter-institutionally, as well as sufficient resourcing, child- and family-centred programming, public outreach and advocacy for universal access.

Each level of the system is interdependent on the other levels, so the stronger a surrounding level is, the stronger the final outcomes can be in the inner levels.

In addition, the construction of the definition and provisions of quality goes beyond ECEC practitioners, institutions, and systems. Urban et al. (2011) also remind us that children, families, communities, and other stakeholders' voices are essential in "the relational and processual aspects of quality." In this respect, quality must be a "multi-dimensional and generic construct" (ibid, p.24) and each of the levels needs to include the voices of all stakeholders in order to define competent ECD systems.

1.1.1 Competences at the Individual Level

These competences are developed through involvement in continuous professional development, evaluating one's own practice, sharing with others, observing and dialoguing with others, planning for and implementing changes in practice, and continuous reflection on practice.

VALUES PRACTICES KNOWLEDGE

A   Reflect

B   Observe

C   Discuss
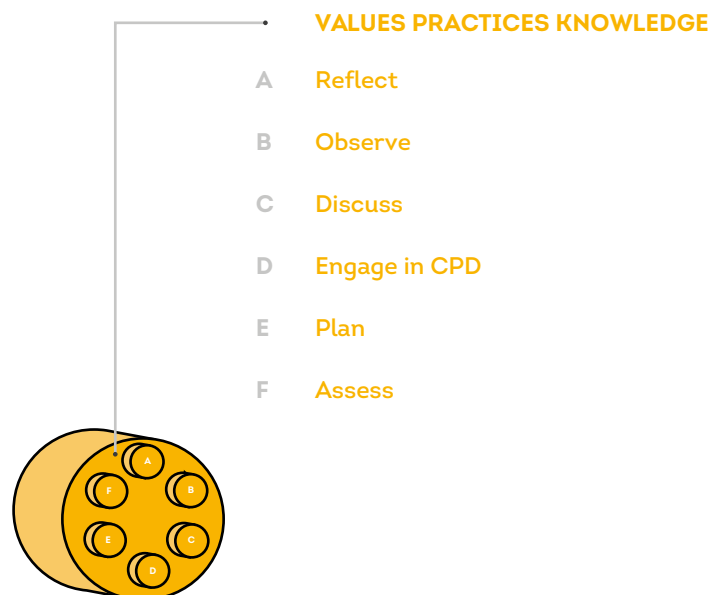
D   Engage in CPD

E   Plan

F   Assess

Figure 4 *Competences at Individual level*

Urban et al. (2011: 21) point out that:

> *Often, we associate the term 'competence' with the qualities of an individual practitioner, something that can be acquired through training and professional preparation (i.e. the integration of knowledge, skills, at-*

titudes, motivation, …). The difficulty with this concept is that it is rather narrow. Especially in the English language context, 'being competent' (a fully human attribute) is often reduced to 'competences' – a series of skills and pieces of knowledge that individuals need to 'possess' in order to perform a particular task.

They add that at the level of the individual practitioner, being and becoming 'competent' is a continuous process that comprises the capability and ability to build on a body of professional knowledge, practice and develop and show professional values (Urban et al., 2011: 35). Although it is important to have a 'body of knowledge' and 'practice', practitioners and teams also need reflective competences as they work in highly complex, unpredictable and diverse contexts (ibid, p. 21).

Competent early childhood educators are strong professionals. Being a professional includes:

- having a sound body of professional knowledge, skills and values that grounds the everyday practice

- participating in procedures that lead to achieving certain principles in their practice including self- and group reflection on practice;

- being autonomous in using and implementing professional knowledge, practices and values in different situations as well as be able to reflect on practice and evaluate it;

- having a voice to advocate for quality and equity;

- gaining recognition and prestige within the broader community.

1.1.2 Competences at the Institutional Level

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

A   Communities of Practice

B   Shared Vision and Inclusive Culture

C   Shared Leadership
and Collaborative Management

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Figure 5 *Competences at the Institutional level*

These competences are acquired through dialoguing on a vision for quality practice, sharing leadership on how to implement that vision, planning for changes in practice with those involved in the institution (including staff, board members, and families), documenting changes and reflecting on them, engaging in shared monitoring and evaluation, and working with others as a learning community.

Institutions include individual practitioners and administrators, but also the institution's board members, parents and parent organizations, and community liaisons. An institution's culture and vision both set the tone and focus of relationships and interactions between leaders, staff, families, the community, and children. When an institution shows respect for and includes all stakeholders, values diversity and inclusion, and uses democratic approaches and strategies to ensure that these values are acted upon, then practitioners share a common language and are better able to support each other in creating and maintaining an inclusive culture.

The organizational culture also sets the tone of whether the ECEC institution is "a critically reflective community that reciprocally interacts with the changing needs of children, parents, the local community, and wider society and how it

understands its role as a forum for civil engagement that fosters social cohesion" (Urban et al., 2011: 40). Cultures need to reflect inclusive, participatory, and democratic values.

Collaborative management and distributed leadership refer to sharing decision-making around quality improvement and professional development with teaching staff, with their school boards and even with families. It looks for ways to involve everyone as informed users of monitoring and evaluation tools to improve practices and outcomes.

Building communities of practice within institutions (Urban et al., 2011; EC, 2014) are increasingly seen as a good strategy for professional development and for enacting the kinds of change that are necessary in ECEC systems at the institutional level (Eurofound, 2015). They empower educators to take ownership for setting the course for changes they would like to see happen, as well as supporting them in the change process through providing them with the resources and time to collaborate and to learn (and unlearn) together. The leaders of institutions also need to arrange conditions for meeting diverse professional needs in the learning communities and ways for recognizing teaching staff's work both within and outside the institution.

1.1.3 Competences at the Inter-institutional Level

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

A   Shared Vision

B   Professional Development

C   Quality Delivery

D   Communication

E   Leadership

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL
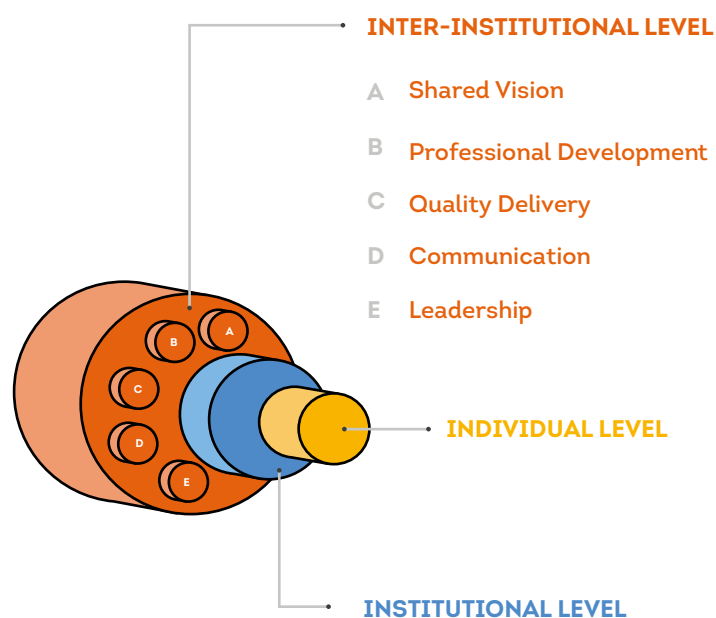
Figure 6 *Competences at the Inter-institutional level*

Inter-institutional cooperation, collaboration, coordination, and integration can happen between similar institutions (such as networks of kindergartens/preschools or primary schools), between institutions where children and families transition (such as preschool and primary schools), between sectors such as early childhood education and health or social services, between practitioners and researchers, between in-service and pre-service providers, etc. Once again, the processes required to achieve competences at this level require dialoguing, planning, documenting, research, and reflection.

It is acknowledged that greater cooperation between institutions and sectors working with young children and their families' needs to occur in order to best support the development of all children (Woodhead, 2014; Lancet, 2016). This acknowledgement has also shown that ECD services are complex and has highlighted that more attention needs to be paid to putting practices into place to facilitate this cooperation to succeed.

In the past, it has been seen in countries where pilots have been carried out, or smaller scale projects or work in the birth to three subsector of ECD, that intersectoral cooperation, especially between the education, health, and social services sectors, is crucial to providing quality services to children and families (Woodhead, 2014). However, it has also been a more

challenging concept to introduce, implement and monitor due the complexity of working and cooperating, collaborating and coordinating between sectors that have different professional standards, knowledge and skills and professional development requirements. Documenting success stories at this level is important, showing how things can be done.

Inter-institutional cooperation is also evidenced between how teacher training institutes/university ECD programs and ECD practitioners work together in pre-service practicums or informing research being conducted. Additionally, it includes cooperation, collaboration and coordination between civil society groups and early childhood departments in local and national governments.

Competences that facilitate inter-institutional cooperation include expanding and coordinating professional development opportunities among different institutions from the same sector and from different sectors so that there is greater understanding among different kinds of institutions, as well a larger, more diversified knowledge base. Competences also include knowledge, skills and values of facilitating communications and information sharing between institutions, effective leadership that builds and promotes a shared vision among the institutions involved, and the delivery of quality of service.

1.1.4 Competences at the Policy and Governance Levels

GOVERNANCE AND POLICY LEVEL

A Inter-institutional policies

B Resources

C Workforce Policies

D Advocacy for universal access

E Monitoring, Evaluation, Research

F Child and Family Centred Curricula

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL
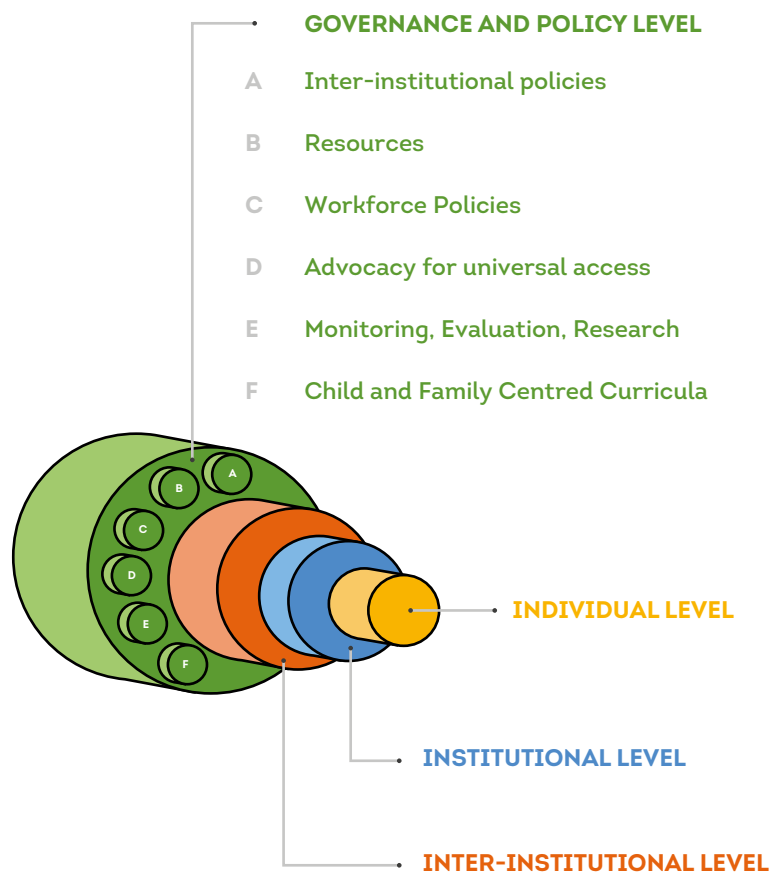
Figure 7 *Competences at the Governance and Policy level*

According to the European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (EC, 2014), early childhood services need to part of a comprehensive system of coherent public policies that link together. Components of competent governance and policies include:

- policies that support a competent workforce;

- policies that support inter-institutional cooperation, collaboration, coordination and integration;

- adequate resourcing/financing, human, structural, etc.;

- empowering monitoring and evaluation processes including support for applied research;

- child- and family-centred approaches as the foundation for programming and curriculum;

- universal access for all children/families and supporting public awareness.

PART 2 | ONE STEP AT A TIME ... (CO-)CONSTRUCTING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF AND WORK ON QUALITY

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

To better understand the findings presented in this study, this chapter briefly describes the legacy and the journey that ISSA has made since its inception in defining, understanding and working to promote and sustain the quality of early childhood services in different countries through the work of its members.

The chapter presents how ISSA gradually enriched both its understanding of quality pedagogy and its approach to professionalism in the early-years services and illustrates the many ways in which ISSA members have been enabled and supported in the past six years to work at different levels of the system to determine changes in their countries.

Practitioners, pre- and in-service trainers, supervisors and policy makers can also find in this chapter a brief description of the tools and instruments that ISSA has developed since 2009 to promote professionalism in the early-years workforce and to support meaningful and sustained changes towards improved quality services.

KEY MESSAGES

- ISSA has dedicated the past twenty years to working on quality, merging cutting-edge knowledge from the field, the growing expertise in the network and requests and needs from the practice in a responsive way.

Timeline of the QRP Development – ISSA's journey

Step by Step began as an approved professional development programme in 15 countries

ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy published

Putting knowledge into Practice Guidebook and the Professional Development Tools published

ISSA Pedagogical Standards published and mentoring / certification started

Online Video Library set up

1996 — **2002** — **2010** — **2011** — **2012**

Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices published and establishing member's reliability began

2013

2018 — **2016** — **2015** — **2015** — **2014**

Documentation study on the implementation of the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy and the QRP

Professional Learning Communities published

Advocacy Leaflets published and QRP packaged

ISSA Quality Framework for Practices in Services for Children Under three years of Age published

Roads to Quality - Strengthening professionalism in early childhood education and care published

- ISSA's journey reflects the changes in the network and its growth in terms of understanding quality and professionalism in early years.

- Change cannot be created without stepping beyond the comfort zone. During the journey ISSA made a significant steps out of its own and its members' comfort zone by: promoting a more value-based approach to quality (shifting from Quality Standards to Quality Principles); stronger member participation and acknowledging internal knowledge and expertise (translating resources developed by members, recognizing members' autonomy, responding to members' requests, etc.); nurturing dialogue among members and constructing new knowledge (reliability meetings and building professional learning communities).

- Usefulness and ownership: the QRP addresses a wide range of actors in the ECEC systems and enables a systemic approach to quality improvement by opening and sustaining a dialogue around quality and professionalism anchored in research, policy and practice.

- Listening to practice: the voices of "frontline" workers are heard, acknowledged and incorporated in the QRP.

- Nurturing autonomy while preserving the quality of the work: ISSA has nurtured the autonomy and proactivity of its members. The resources in the QRP are well-structured, yet flexible enough so that members can adapt them to their needs and the specificity of the context they are working in. There is a good balance secured between members' freedom, their need to grow and have a say, and the quality of the utilization of the resources and their general work on quality.

- ISSA has provided members with different types of ongoing support.

Translating resources and creating a database of relevant resources

Capacity building: Training and Professional Learning Communities

Technical assistance

Reliability meetings

Supporting and participating in national and international events

Member-driven peer-learning activities
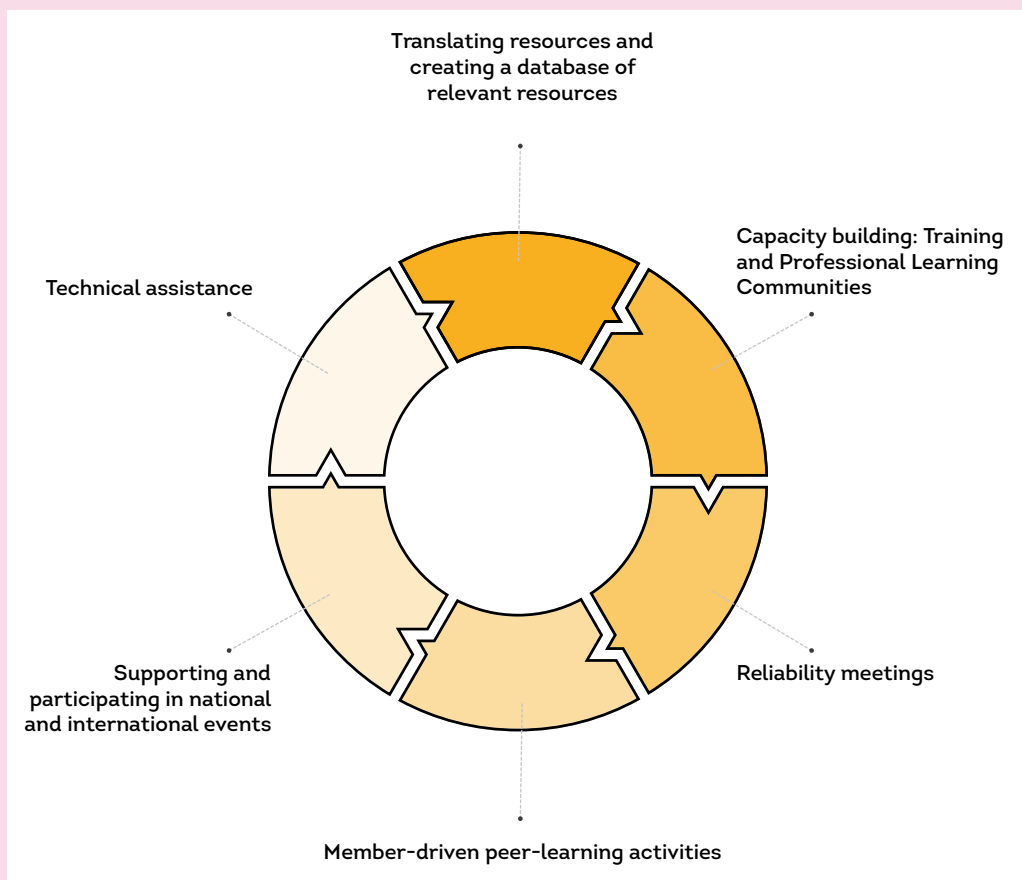
In the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and huge political changes in the countries belonging to the Eastern Bloc, the Open Society Foundations (OSF) introduced the Step by Step (SbS) Program in 29 countries which wanted to introduce new values and approaches into the educational system and were aiming to transition to more democratic practices in ECEC services. The SbS Program was an innovative methodology and it introduced a child-centered approach in pre-school and primary education, promoting respect for the family as the child's first and most important educator, and encouraging educators, parents, and communities to see the earliest years of a child's life as the foundation for learning to think critically and become active members of democratic societies. The program included a complex and comprehensive approach to changing what was predominantly a teacher-centered paradigm by involving state institutions at different levels (pre-service and in-service, policy makers, local and national authorities, etc.) and promoting on-going professional development through training, mentoring and coaching, and creating local networks of professionals. The program is still in implementation 20 years after its inception.

In 1999, the NGOs implementing the Step by Step (SbS) Program decided to join forces and the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) was set up with the aim to make members stronger, their voices more relevant and practices more visible on the national and international level in order to promote the importance of the early years and access to high-quality early years services for all children, especially the most vulnerable.

Since the very beginning, ISSA has acknowledged the importance of working on the development of competences at all levels of the ECEC system in order to create a change and best support inclusive, high-quality practices in all of its members' programs. This work started even before the languages of competences were introduced in the CoRe Report in 2011 and the European Quality Framework was introduced in 2014. This is evidenced through the comprehensive approach of the SbS Program, which included a strong focus on professional development activities (extensive training accompanied by mentoring and coaching), as well as outreach to families, communities, and local and national education authorities.

Some significant steps in pursuing and expanding the systemic understanding of quality are described below.

2.1 CREATION OF PEDAGOGICAL STANDARDS

Building on this legacy, ISSA began developing and then implementing *ISSA Pedagogical Standards*[3] with the financial and technical support of OSF as a pathway to defining and ensuring quality in teaching practices in preschool and primary school classrooms in the members' countries. A working group of eleven educators from the region spent two years developing, piloting and validating what became the *ISSA Pedagogical Standards* in 2002, building on the experiences of practitioners who had been implementing the SbS program. Since the very beginning, its work has been participatory, highly grounded in practice, and infused with findings from research and theory. The Standards were seen as a framework for programs/educators, mentors/teacher trainers, inspectors, administrators, etc. to improve, recognize and advocate for quality practice.

2.2 MENTORING AND CERTIFICATION OF TEACHERS

In 2002, ISSA also started to develop a teacher certification system that included mentoring support in order to reach a level of practice whereby educators could reach an acceptable score to receive an ISSA certificate of teaching excellence. ISSA Teacher Certification was a voluntary process designed to encourage and recognize quality improvement and promote the teaching profession in the region. ISSA members who wished to certify their educators were required to obtain authorization from ISSA and OSF, demonstrating the profound knowledge and understanding of quality in ECEC of certifiers, development of a reliable system of certification in the country and effective NGO governance and operations. Seventeen of ISSA's members received this authorization.

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3 – The ISSA Pedagogical Standards were later revised to become the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy.

Establishing and maintaining reliability across certifiers was key to ensuring that levels of educator quality remained constant. In addition, establishing and maintaining reliability among mentors proved to increase their focus, deepen the understanding of the Standards and their ability to translate them into practice, and to provide more concrete feedback to educators (Howard, 2010).

A study by Howard published in 2010 conducted on the implementation of *ISSA Pedagogical Standards* and their impact on practices and policies documented that: teaching skills improved; mentoring and support skills for teachers improved; there was increased peer and administrative support; and new policy documents were enacted in many countries, including new national curricula, national teaching standards, and early learning and development standards. This showed that the *ISSA Pedagogical Standards* were making an impact in terms of creating more competent ECEC systems in many of the countries where ISSA members were operating. In this respect, we see that the foundation for the QRP to act as an impetus for influencing competences of practitioners to competences of ECEC systems was laid in these early years.

2.3 MOVING FROM STANDARDS TO PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY PEDAGOGY

Continued discussions among ISSA members, challenging the existing knowledge and prevailing understanding of quality, resulted in the revision of the *ISSA Pedagogical Standards* and the development in 2010. The new document, *Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy*, incorporated changes that reflected the additional societal changes that had occurred after the first document was published, learning from implementing the first version, as well as new priorities in approaching and addressing quality, especially around issues of equity, social justice and diversity.

The change from standards to principles was based on the premise that pedagogical principles are more closely tied to values. Values are more open for dialogue, following more democratic processes of dialogue and inclusion of community's input. Quality is a concept which should be defined by all the stakeholders' engagement.

While the revised document incorporated the latest research findings in the field from across the world and lessons learned from eight years of implementing the *ISSA Pedagogical Standards*, it also mirrored some of ISSA's on-going reflection about quality process and professional development processes. Part of renaming the document from Standards to Principles "reflected the intention to move beyond standards as an instrument for assessment and evaluation to principles that could demonstrate ISSA's emphasis on inviting all stakeholders to discussion and on-going improvement of policies and practices (ISSA, 2010, p. 9)."

In some countries, (for example in Armenia and Croatia) the term 'standards' is still used instead of 'principles'.

> *"On one hand, due to old ISSA Teacher's Standards, our network of teachers was used to the term 'standard' for many years and it was logical to use the same term to show further the logical connection with what has already been done, and the development and continuity of the quality assurance mechanisms. On another hand, the word 'principle' in the Armenian language does not convey the same meaning as it does in English. Since our purpose was to make our educators understand the purpose for which the Quality Principles exist rather than the use of the word which was causing confusion, we decided to leave the word 'standard' and think about changing it at a later stage. However, during our training, we always try to explain that this is a more open-ended and flexible document compared with the old standards, therefore we can consider them as principles, which is actually written in the English version."*
>
> *(Director, Step by Step Benevolent Foundation, Armenia)*

The shift from standards to principles and also the high costs of maintaining a reliability level that supported certification at the level of the network led to the discontinuation of the certification process. However, reliability discussions among members supported by ISSA did continue in order to ensure that all of ISSA members were talking about the quality of educators' and caregivers' practices with a shared understanding, but also to nurture the on-going discussion and reflection on quality.[4]

2.4 SCAFFOLDING THE INFLUENCE ON SYSTEMS – THE GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUALITY RESOURCE PACK (QRP)

The Quality Resource Pack (QRP) addresses a wide range of target audiences, including: educators (individuals or professional communities), pre-service and in-service training institutions, parents (individuals or associations), communities, policy-makers, education authorities, pre-school/school administrators/leaders, evaluators, researchers, the mass media, as well as the general public.

A comprehensive revision of the first version of the Standards and an enhanced resource pack were created starting in 2010 by experts from different member NGOs within the ISSA network as well as outside experts, and were grounded in international research, theory, and documents that outline quality practice in ECEC. The development of the resources and processes for using them are also the result of practices that promoted members' autonomy, participation, and recognition as ECEC professionals. They demonstrate the power of a network to create knowledge and to build the capacity of its members through participatory and sharing processes.

The QRP is designed to set a framework that can be used in different ways for engaging in a dialogue about quality. It can provide support to implement various initiatives/pathways around quality improvement in the early years, at the individual, institutional, national and international levels, thus strengthening the shared understanding of what quality means and how it can be improved. These resources also aim to promote 'process quality', to promote supportive and innovative approaches to professional development, and through their content and approach, help bridge practice with research and policy.

While wanting to develop a consolidated understanding of quality among its members and the participants in their networks, it was also the intention that each member use the resources in ways that best fit their own political, social, cultural, and economic contexts, their focus of work, and their capacity as well as to develop and add their own ideas of how to adapt and use the QRP.

To better enable members to support practitioners in their country in gaining more autonomy and participation in defining quality, in analysing and reflecting on their practice, and in decision making in planning and implementing changes in practice, ISSA developed and implemented a Quality Assurance Improvement Strategy in 2011–2014 with sustained support from OSF. The aim was to boost and enable members to use the resources in the QRP to improve the quality of services in their countries. By offering different kinds of resources and assistance, members could choose the most appropriate support for their own work.

QRP consists of different resources which are interconnected, building a solid scaffolding system for translating theory into practice and helping professionals on different levels of the system to introduce, implement and maintain quality practices into ECEC services.

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4 – To guarantee that the use of ISSA resources is in line with the purpose for which they have been created, the Quality Resources Pack is subject to a licensing process. If you are interested in learning more about obtaining the license to use the resources, contact: info@issa.nl

Timeline of the QRP Development – ISSA's journey

The gradual addition of resources in the QRP was the result of continuous learning from members as regards how they can better influence practice and policies in their countries. Listening to the needs of members and having them involved in developing the resources, made the resources in QRP relevant and timely and more likely to be used.

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The ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy (ISSA, 2010)

The policy document, *Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy*, defines quality teaching practices in working with children aged 3–10 and their families to better support the child's development, learning and well-being. The document outlines 20 Principles and 85 Indicators of quality, structured around **seven Focus Areas** of early childhood professional practice:
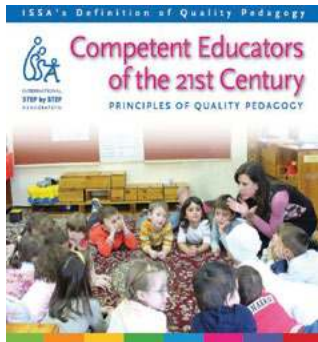
1. Interactions

2. Family and Community

3. Inclusion, Diversity, and the Values of Democracy

4. Assessment and Planning

5. Teaching Strategies

6. Learning Environment

7. Professional Development.

It also contains a brief history about the development of the Principles, including references to the international documents and research on which they are built, and explanations of the values they represent for ISSA and its member NGOs. This document provides the conceptual framework for most of the resources in the *Quality Resource Pack* and is grounded in child-centered pedagogy. The document has been translated in more than 20 languages by ISSA members.

Putting Knowledge into Practice: A Guidebook for Educators on the ISSA Principles of Quality Practice (ISSA, 2012)

The *Guidebook* is a reference book that gives an in-depth description of each of the Principles of Quality Pedagogy and the related Indicators. The *Guidebook* makes the connection between theory and practice, presenting results from research which have been relevant to each focus area, and the important international documents that have contributed to the formulation of ISSA's Principles of Quality Pedagogy, describing why each principle is important. It also provides examples of how to practically apply the Principles for each of the indicators that describe quality, and how children can benefit from this kind of action.
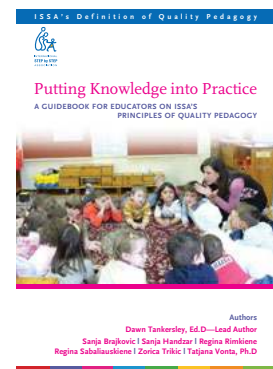
The Professional Development Tools for Improving Quality of Practices (in Kindergarten and in Primary School) (ISSA, 2012)

These tools specifically illustrate (for both pre-school and primary school levels of education) each of the 85 indicators of quality in the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy. They deconstruct how educators move on a continuum from inadequate practice, to a good start, to quality practice and then into transformational practice whereby they begin to create systemic change in the teaching paradigm and practice. Concrete examples (which are specific to pre-school and the early grades of primary school) of the different kinds of action that educators may take at different levels of practice are given for each indicator of quality, in a continuum format.

However, the tools also recognize that *quality* is a concept that is socially constructed. The tool was designed with dialogue in mind by asking a question at the end of each indicator: *What are other ways that educators can...?* Although the tool may be very useful in describing levels of practice, there are always other examples of behaviors or actions in each level of the indicators, and such examples could be developed by educators working with others so that different perspectives can be presented and reflected upon. The examples are meant to be changed based on the specific and diverse contexts that educators work in, and not as fixed indicators.

Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices in Early Childhood Education Services for Children from 3 to 10 Years Old (Assessment Instrument) (ISSA, 2013)

The *Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices* is a condensed version of the *Professional Development Tool for Improving Quality of Practice* to rate or assess educator performance with a select group of indicators. Its 36 key indicators were derived from the two *Professional Development Tools*, based on the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy*. This set of Indicators are the most distinguishable (most observable, most challenging to reach in terms of quality practice), and serve as proxies for other indicators in terms of defining quality practice. The *Instrument* provides a way to quickly gather a snapshot of educators' practice, in order to gauge the implementation of the larger set of Indicators of quality.

The large majority of the indicators in the Assessment Instrument are easily observable, with the exception of five indicators in the Focus Areas on Family and Community and Assessment and Planning, which require documentation and/or an interview to score.

As the Indicators presented in the Instrument only provide a snapshot profile of educator quality, they should not be used as the only source of material to assess an individual educator's practice. Referencing the full set of Indicators in the *Professional Development Tools for Improving Quality of Practices* in kindergartens/pre-schools and primary schools is needed to provide depth and additional examples of quality practice for professional development intervention.

INSTRUMENT FOR ASSESSING QUALITY PRACTICES
in Early childhood Education services for Children from 3 to 10 Years Old

No.	Indicator	Description	Observation	Interview/ Documentation
1. INTERACTIONS				
1.	1.1.4	The educator's interactions are responsive to each child's emotional, social, physical, and cognitive strengths and needs.	x	
2.	1.1.5	The educator provides opportunities for children to make choices and to have those choices realized and respected by others.	x	
3.	1.1.6	The educator's interactions with children develop their initiative, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and leadership.	x	
4.	1.2.2	The educator offers activities that help children learn to distinguish feelings, to recognize them in themselves and their peers, and to communicate about them.	x	
5.	1.2.3	The educator promotes democratic values by encouraging every child to express his/her opinion in an appropriate way and to participate in decision making.	x	
2. FAMILY AND COMMUNITIES				
6.	2.1.2	The educator involves family members in shared decision making about their children's learning, development, and social life in the classroom.		x
7.	2.1.3	The educator involves family members in decision-making concerning children's learning environments.		x
8.	2.2.3	The educator promotes opportunities for families to learn from one another and to support each other.		x
9.	2.3.3	The educator uses knowledge of children's communities and families as an integral part of the curriculum and their learning experiences.		x

Inter-rater reliability, or the ability between people who are scoring the instrument to rate indicators at the same level, is an important component of any type of evaluation that compares ratings, or is used as a mechanism to formally assess performance. As the *Instrument* was developed primarily for the purpose of evaluation, it is imperative that a robust system of reliability is utilized. Because there are so few Indicators rated, the importance of reliability is increased, since there is less opportunity for educators to demonstrate the quality of practice being rated.

ISSA has developed a **system of reliability** that provides a structure for countries to develop reliable observers, providing consistency throughout the ISSA network. Within ISSA, there is a core group of reliability coordinators who have established and maintain inter-rater reliability at a minimum level of 85% on a yearly basis, and have also supported the process of extending reliability in countries where licensed members are using or planning to use the Instrument. Others who use the *Instrument* must be trained and should establish this same level of reliability with one of the reliability experts.

The *Assessment Instrument* is a tool developed for **supporting** the professional development of educators. A detailed **Methodology** for using the Instrument, and a **Database** for recording and processing the data collected through observations, documentation and interviews have been developed to assure the appropriate use of the Instrument.

ISSA Quality Improvement Tools
Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices
METHODOLOGY

The instrument can be used for individual or group assessment (in one or more settings, including the level of a community, region, country) with the purpose of identifying areas of strength and growth in pedagogical practice, thus leading to a more in-depth learning process following the Professional Development Tool and other resources in the Quality Resource Pack.

The Assessment Instrument helps educators and professionals in charge of professional development of staff working in pre-schools and primary schools to develop a tailored, mutually agreed upon, and focused Professional Development Plan for an individual and professional development priorities on the level of one or more settings.

An Online Video Library on Quality Pedagogy (2012)[5]

INTERNATIONAL
STEP by STEP
ASSOCIATION

The Little House of Democracy

The online video library is a collection of over 40 short video clips of educators and children in classrooms (pre-school and primary), which illustrate how certain indicators of quality practice are being implemented. They present concrete examples of educators' practices and how children respond to them, as well as family involvement and participation in the education process, and educators' reflections on their own work.

Each video also contains questions for reflection and dialogue on what can be observed from the video clips, as well as the other things educators can do in their classrooms to demonstrate quality practice. This tool is also supported with the guidelines on how to make videos and how to use them during the professional development events.

(The videos have been collected from various settings in countries where ISSA members work and they have subtitles in three languages: English, Russian and Slovak).

Professional Learning Communities (2016)

This is a guidebook for those who are interested in building professional learning communities among practitioners on the level of a setting, building on the experience carried out by Open Academy Step by Step in Croatia by working with the QRP in a number of kindergartens and primary school.[6] It has been written by Sanja Brajkovic, one of the experts at the ISSA member organization. The publication is solid proof of bridging practice with research and policy, and an inspiring practical tool for nurturing the competence mentioned in the previous

SANJA BRAJKOVIĆ
PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING
COMMUNITIES
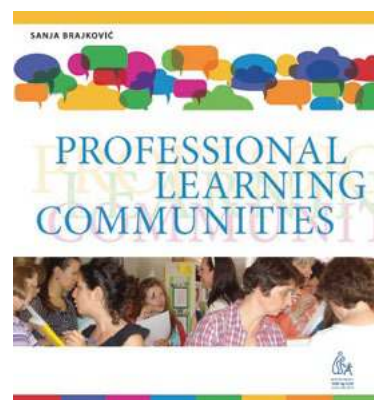
5 – The video library is subject to license. For more information contact: info@issa.nl
6 – For more information see the section: Influencing the Institutional Level

sections, at the individual and institutional level. It provides many reflections and lessons learned but also provides a lot of practical guidance on the steps to be taken in building up a nurturing self-sustaining learning community, driven by practitioners.

Leaflets for Advocacy Initiatives for Quality Practices (ISSA, 2014)

ISSA has published leaflets to promote the message that high-quality practices in early childhood education and care services improve children's lives by laying the foundation for lifelong development and learning. There are three leaflets available for three different audiences: policy-makers/ education authorities, early childhood educators, and parents. Their purpose is to bring attention to the roles that each of these audiences play in advocating for and creating the kinds of environments and relationships in which young children can thrive.


Because they are addressed to different audiences, they also convey the message that quality in early childhood services is a shared understanding among different stakeholders. In order to implement quality in early childhood services, all stakeholders need to be in dialogue together as partners about what quality means to them, and to support each other in its provision. In this way, democratic approaches to building quality ECD systems are strengthened, as multiple voices are included and each one is empowered to fulfil their own roles in its implementation.

The leaflets provide basic information on why quality in early childhood services is important to each of these stakeholders. They also outline ISSA's definition on early childhood quality pedagogy as a point of starting dialogue about their shared understanding of quality, and provide links for how to get more information on ISSA and its members, as well as their activities as a means to support their processes.

Roads to Quality: Strengthening Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings (ISSA, 2016)

In 2015, ISSA published a guidebook on how to use the QRP to increase professionalism through participatory processes which the member organizations could introduce and use with different audiences with whom they work. The main avenues are defined by mentoring, coaching, peer observation, and participation in professional learning communities. This resource offers an approach that reflects the consistency between scaffolding children's development and learning and scaffolding practitioners' professional growth in such a way that each achieves their full potential, building on their strength and knowledge. The handbook provides guidance on how to use the resources in the QRP for individual mentoring, group coaching, in professional learning communities, by enabling democratic practices that empower and support professionals to grow.
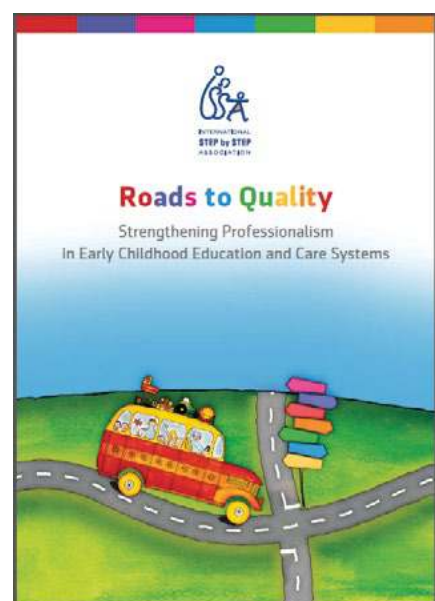
2.5 ON-GOING SUPPORT PROVIDED TO MEMBERS

While training in quality child-centred pedagogy and mentoring educators continues to be the main focus area of ISSA members, they have also been exploring how to use its Quality Resource Pack to influence the competences of ECEC institutions and systems/governance which ultimately is the basis for increasing practitioners' competences. To support members' ability to move more into working at the individual/team, institutional, inter-institutional and governance levels, ISSA has also provided for the following.

- Technical assistance was provided to members in different formats, such as visits to other members or in country training sessions, in which experts from other ISSA member NGOs were providing training.
- Capacity-building through thematic meetings on building learning communities, working with higher education, how to develop videos to be used during professional development, how to use the Wanda method[7] to strengthen group reflection or what can we learn from the Tuscan Approach[8] to improve the quality of services.
- 27 reliability meetings in member countries conducted by the 11 ISSA Reliability Coordinators aimed at building a shared understanding around the Quality Principles, the appropriate use of the tools – both on the level of the network and on the country level and for expanding the group of local reliability anchors on the country level.
- Member-driven peer-learning and support between countries, aimed at exchanges that support local capacity building or advocacy.
- Participation in international conferences or regional conferences on quality, such as the support for the annual conference hosted by the Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step in Bosnia-Herzegovina for teachers from the countries of ex-Yugoslavia.
- Translation of the resources published by ISSA into Russian, including a manual on how to create videos to enrich the video library.
- Translation of resources created by members such as the manual on how to implement Professional Learning Communities created by Sanja Brajkovic from the Croatian member, Open Academy Step by Step translated from Croatian into English.
- Supporting national events in which the QRP was introduced to ministries, professionals, and other relevant stakeholders.
- Providing members with information on state-of-the-art literature and resources – sharing information via ISSA communication channels.
- Creating a Quality Online Portfolio in which members could share information (resources, data, events) regarding their initiatives focused on quality improvement engaging different types of stakeholders. qualitative and quantitative data.

Translating resources and creating a database of relevant resources

Capacity building: Training and Professional Learning Communities

Technical assistance

Reliability meetings

Supporting and participating in national and international events

Member-driven peer-learning activities
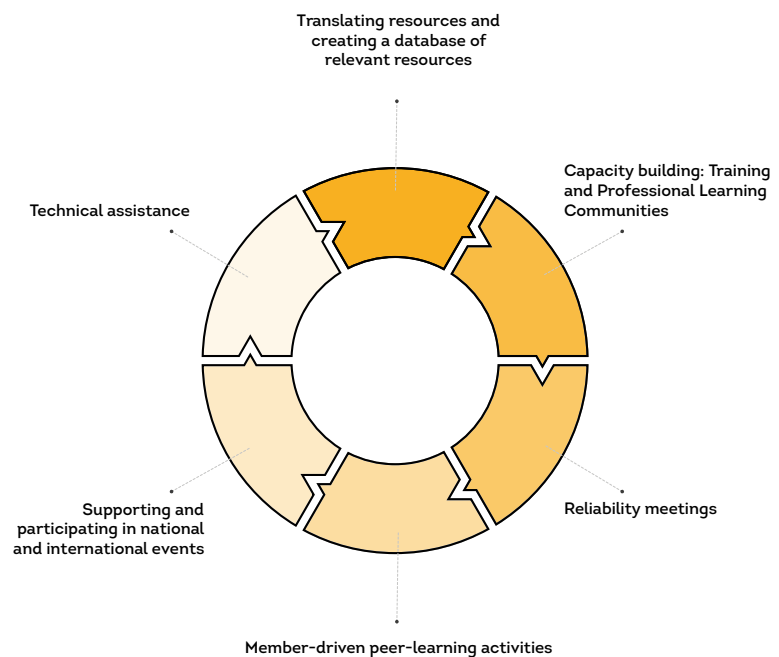
7 – For more information see: https://vbjk.be/en/publication/wanda-manual/contact
8 – For more information see: https://www.istitutodeglinnocenti.it/sites/default/files/ta_impinglese_141030_0.pdf

PART 3 | TIME FOR DOCUMENTING AND REFLECTING ON OUR WORK ON QUALITY

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

In this section, the main findings of the study are presented. They are organized around the four levels of a competent system and they illustrate the many ways in which 25 surveyed ISSA members managed to contribute to changes in practices or policies by using the *ISSA's Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and its *Quality Resource Pack* with various audiences. It contains many quotes and testimonies from various stakeholders, from different countries, featuring the changes enacted and the challenges they had to overcome.

The chapter provides also inspirational examples (particularly from five countries) of working at each of the four levels of the competent system by involving practitioners, pre- and in-service professionals, managers, supervisors, and governmental officials to address process quality.

KEY MESSAGES

- Resources in the QRP were used in different ways, targeting different audiences.

In-service training (20 members)
Preschool and school teachers
School managers
Pre-service training providers

Reliability meetings (20 members)
Preschool, school teachers, managers
Universities, teachers and students
Ministry representatives
Donors

Professional Learning Communities (8 members)
Preschool and school teachers
Managers
Parents

Pre-service training (4 members)
Universities and students
Pre-service training providers

Monitoring (18 members)
Preschool and school teachers
Teaching assistants

Mentoring (18 members)
Preschool and primary school teachers
Managers
Teaching assistants

Promotion of the profession (9 members)
Parents
Policy makers

Research (6 members)
Teachers
University staff and students
Policy makers

- Some ways of using resources in the QRP were more suitable for enacting and influencing changes at different levels of the systems.

GOVERNANCE AND POLICY LEVEL

Defining national standards for teachers

Increasing education authorities' competences - special focus on school inspectors/supervisors

Monitoring, evaluation and research

Implementation of child and family-centered curricula

Advocating for universal acsess to high quality programs

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Partnering with Local Goverments - Supporting and implementing projects for Roma children and other vulnerable groups

Creating cross-institutional PLCs

Creating networks of PLCs

Partnering with funders and goverment education institutions

Partnering with higher education institutions - universities learning from the practice

Partnering with state agencies working on quality

Positioning NGOs as competent and reliable partners

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Creating communities of practice and constructing new knowledge and practice

Supporting and introducing collaborative managment and shared leadership through training, peer learning, mentoring and observations

Nurturing inclusive institutional culture and respect for diversity

Influencing parent attitudes towards inclusion

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Training focuses only on quality or incorporating the Quality Principles in every session

Mentoring teachers

Monitoring teacher's work

Self and group assessment

Supporting processes of self and group reflections

Linking theory with practice - translating theory into practice and vice versa

Nurturing autonomy in teachers

- Supportive and risk factors for the usage and implementation of resources.

SUPPORTIVE FACTORS	CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES
Strong, expert and connected members	Understanding that change of attitudes and approaches needs time
Good relationship wit, on and among different levels of the system	Lack of sustainable sources of funding
Teachers have paid time for professional development and PD is mandatory	Lack of support from the Ministries and governmental agencies
Capacity of the ISSA members to use QRP in flexible and diverse ways	Ongoing funding for mentoring and monitoring activities

- A lots of time, financing and human capital needs to be invested to enact and support the change.

- Some resources from the QRP turned up to be more appreciated and useful (Principles of Quality Pedagogy, the guidebook Putting Knowledge into Practice and the Professional Development Tools). They were translated in more than 20 languages. Others were randomly used according to the specific needs and activities that members did. The three tools form a golden circle – bridging theory and practice and providing a deeper understanding of the practice and quality in general.

- Members who managed to make the biggest influence in their countries are those who had support at different levels of the system – especially from the governmental and policy level.

- Importance of empowered professionals, avoiding expert solutions – peer-learning and observations as well as working in learning communities has been recognized as the most efficient ways in enacting and creating the change, at all levels of the system.

- Empowered professionals, more democratic educational institutions – in some places, using the QRP made an impact on leadership and management.

- Working with the QRP has the potential to make the institutional climate more inclusive and open to vulnerable children.

- A tool that brings different players together.

- The resources acted as a connecting glue among faculty staff and preschool and primary school staff.

- When working with higher education institutions, having a shared vision and strong leadership is what best supports the development of a strong partnership, and is most likely to occur when higher education faculty are either trainers or board members for the ISSA member organization.

- The use of the resources by members has attracted donors and gained their support, even in contexts where governments were not interested or supportive of the work done by ISSA members.

- Where strong partnerships between schools/kindergartens and higher education institutions were established, research using the tools was carried out.

Building on the work done on quality improvement by following the Pedagogical Standards of the Step by Step Program, starting in 2010 when the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy were published and disseminated in the network, the licensed members have embraced the new resources one by one and have benefitted from support within the network for strengthening their capacity to use them properly in their specific country context. As indicated in the previous sections of the study, the resources in the QRP address a wide range of actors in the ECEC systems and were meant to enable a systemic approach to quality improvement by opening and sustaining a dialogue around quality and professionalism anchored in research, policy and practice.

A large amount of time, finance and human capital has been invested into empowering members to determine changes in their ECEC systems. All licensed[9] members are non-governmental organizations that are primarily known (but not only) as in-service training providers for early childhood professionals, including primary school teachers, bringing innovative knowledge and approaches to professional development in order to challenge existing practices and policies in early childhood education and care. Most of them have been pioneers of reforming changes in early childhood systems in their own countries through the implementation of the Step by Step Program, and they have extensive experience in working with various types of stakeholders at different levels of the system.

After more than five years of intensive work and on-going member support, it is important to understand how much ISSA as a network has managed to create changes at different levels in various countries through its support and empowerment mechanisms. This study was internally commissioned particularly to learn not only how much the QRP and the support provided to members managed to determine new approaches, new practices and influence new policies, but also to share the learning journey of ISSA both as a learning community and as a reflexive network which believes deeply in the co-construction of knowledge, transnational networks of support, nurturing innovation and empowering agents of change.

9 – For more information about the licensing process contact: info@issa.nl

METHODOLOGY USED

In tune with its orientation towards self-reflection and questioning established practices ISSA has decided to undertake this study in order to gain an understanding of the reach, approaches, impact and challenges in its work on quality improvement in the last five years.

The study was organized in two phases.

Phase 1's objectives were to:

- document, analyse and describe approaches in the QRP's implementation for different purposes in different contexts within ISSA's network;

- document challenges and obstacles in using the resources in the QRP and in general in the work on process quality improvement;

- gather ISSA's licensed members' opinions about the impact of using the QRP on processes of quality improvement;

- gather ideas from practice for changes or additions that could make the QRP more useful, meaningful and impactful.

Phase 2 included in-depth data collection from four countries in order to:

- document the impact that the QRP had on quality improvement at different levels of the system (the individual, centre/institutional, inter-institutional and system of governance levels), the challenges in using the QRP, and lessons learned from its successes and challenges;

- document factors that can support or hinder the successful implementation of the work on quality using the resources in the QRP at the individual/group, institutional, inter-institutional and governance levels;

- gather perspectives from different actors and stakeholders at different levels in the system on what is needed to sustain the work on maintaining and improving quality;

- understand where and how the QRP could help increase the level of professionalism among educators including increasing their participation, autonomy, decision making, and recognition.

In Phase 1, documentation was gathered through:

a. desk research for analysing existing ISSA reports on implementation of the QRP from 2011 to 2015 and for analysing the online Quality Portfolio;[10]

b. an online survey-based questionnaire among all 25 *ISSA licenced members*

1. Qendra Hap pas Hapi – Albania

2. Center for Education Initiatives – Jekabpils, Latvia

3. Step by Step Benevolent Foundation – Yerevan, Armenia

4. Center for Innovative Education – Vilnius, Lithuania

5. Step by Step Benevolent Foundation – Baku, Azerbaijan

6. Step by Step Foundation for Educational and Cultural Initiatives – Skopje, Macedonia

7. Parents' and Teachers' League Step by Step – Minsk, Belarus

8. SbS Educational Program – Chisinau, Moldova

9. Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step – Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

10. Mongolian Education Alliance – Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

11. Step by Step Program Foundation – Sofia, Bulgaria

12. Pedagogical Center of Montenegro – Podgorica, Montenegro

13. Open Academy Step by Step – Zagreb, Croatia

14. Step by Step Centre for Education and Professional Development – Bucharest, Romania

15. Step by Step Czech Republic – Prague, Czech Republic

16. CIP-Center for Interactive Pedagogy – Belgrade, Serbia

17. Hea Algus – Tartu, Estonia

18. Wide Open School – Ziar nad Hronom, Slovakia

19. Center for Educational Initiatives – Tbilisi, Georgia

20. Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education – Ljubljana, Slovenia

21. Step by Step Community Foundation – Almaty, Kazakhstan

22. OSI Assistance Foundation, Early Childhood Development Program – Dushanbe, Tajikistan

23. Kosova Education Center – Pristina, Kosovo

24. Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation – Kiev, Ukraine

25. Foundation for Education Initiatives Support – Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

10 – For documenting the work on Quality Improvement in terms of reach and diversity of uses of the Quality Resources, ISSA created an online platform in 2012 for licensed members to upload relevant quantitative and qualitative data regarding their initiatives around quality improvement. The platform is accessible only to licensed members.

c. guided interviews with 13 members who implemented the QRP for gathering further information about strategies and processes they used, country context regarding pre-service and on-going professional development, how they documented the implementation of the QRP, how it impacted the members' activities, and ideas for improvement. The additional data gathered in the interviews expanded the understanding of the scope of the different contexts in which members operated in implementing the QRP.

Four ISSA members, the Open Academy Step by Step from Croatia, the Step by Step Benevolent Foundation from Armenia, the Step by Step Educational Program from Moldova, and the Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education from Slovenia were selected for more in-depth data collection based on the following criteria.

• The member's work had to be primarily focused on quality improvement through professional development using the QRP.

• Significant number of practitioners had to have been engaged with the QRP.

• The members had to have worked at other levels beyond the individual/team level.

• The members had to have used a variety of strategies in using the resources at various levels of working with increasing competences in the system.

Documentation from the work of these four members will be referred to more often in this documentation study, as more data was collected to provide examples of the how the QRP was used as well as specifics on the challenges the members faced in their work.

A fifth member's work from Kosovo (the Kosova Education Centre) will also be featured, as they provide an example of how the implementation of the QRP worked to increase competences at all levels of the ECEC system.

3.1 INFLUENCING QUALITY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ECEC SYSTEMS BY USING THE QRP

General Findings

ISSA's data-collection process (2016) on the QRP's influence within ECEC systems included 25 ISSA members which are licensed to work with the QRP. Although these members had a very similar structure and focus and are still involved as in-service teacher-training providers in their respective countries, there has been great diversification in the past six years in the members' focus, funding sources, and ways of operating, including whether the work on quality improvement using the *Quality Resource Pack* is one of the member's main areas of focus.

This diversity is the result of how different governments are open to, or actively support the work the NGO does, or in some cases place obstacles to the work, as well as what the NGOs funding sources may be, whether they are specialized in areas such as education of vulnerable children including Roma and children with special needs, or whether they work with mostly preschool/kindergarten or primary school programs. Despite the diversity of members' programmatic profile, it is important to mention that 20 of the members are operating in a centralized educational system where government does not put up major obstacles to the work that members are doing in quality improvement by implementing the QRP. The positive news is that over 80% of the members surveyed feel there is some government support for the work they are doing around quality assurance and that there is recognition at the national level of the ISSA QRP as a useful and practical set of tools.

Of the 25 members surveyed, 16 reported that working with the QRP to improve the quality of practice in ECEC is one of the main areas of activity for their NGO. Those who stated that quality improvement is not their major focus work more on access to mainstream ECEC for the most vulnerable children. However, they find QRP resources useful for opening the dialogue around the shared understanding of quality, and the connection between access and quality especially when referring to the most vulnerable children inseparable. In two countries, members are working with a government that is less open to their work.

As to whether quality improvement work is the main focus of the NGO's work or not:

- all licensed members have a workable translation of the *Principles of Quality Pedagogy* that they distribute to educators as content in trainings, for presentations to government bodies, for mentoring practitioners and as presentations to local networks of Step by Step educators (Program Report 2015), meaning that Principles are available in more than 20 languages;

- working translations of the other materials range from the large majority (over 90%) having translated the guidebook *Putting Knowledge into Practice* and the *Professional Development Tools* to a majority (over two-thirds) working with the *Assessment Instrument*, the video library, or advocacy leaflets (information is not available on the use of the *Roads to Quality* as it has been published only one year previous to the research);

- many of the members found the translation process to be enriching, and also saw it as an opportunity for joint learning – agreeing on the most accurate translation required reflection and dialogue.

Members have worked with the resources with a wide range of stakeholders through training, mentoring, reliability meetings, creating professional learning communities, advocacy activities, activities for pre-service training, or research. Below is brief overview on the various ways in which the resources have been used with diverse target groups.

20–23 of the members surveyed provided **training** to preschool and primary school teachers, with preschool and primary school managers.

12–14 managed to provide training to pre-service training providers, donors, student teachers, and ministry representatives.

Four members managed to reach more than 2,000 preschool teachers and more than 2,000 primary school teachers.

20 members provided **reliability meetings** for preschool and primary school teachers, but very few also involved managers, policy makers, pre-service training providers, student teachers, ministry representatives or donors.

Eight members worked on **building professional learning communities** for preschool and primary school teachers.

Six did the same for managers of both types of institutions.

Three members managed to include parents in the learning communities.

3–4 members worked with the resources to **influence the pre-service training**

18 –20 members used the resources for **monitoring** preschool and primary school teachers, as well as teaching assistants.

18–20 members provided **mentoring** to preschool and primary school teachers.

6–8 members gave mentoring to preschool and primary school managers, and preschool teaching assistants.

8–9 members worked with the resources to **promote the importance of the profession** of educator.

Six members used the resources for **research** purposes.

One strength of implementing the QRP has been the diversity of ISSA members in how the different resources were used and with which audiences. The national context of each member's country has been unique, including their access to financial and human resources encouraging the development of different kinds of strategies to implement the QRP. Both the diversity of ways in which the resources were used, as well as the diversity in the audiences reached indicate the high

potential for a systemic impact that the use of resources might have on ECEC systems if capacities, competences, resources and conditions are in place.
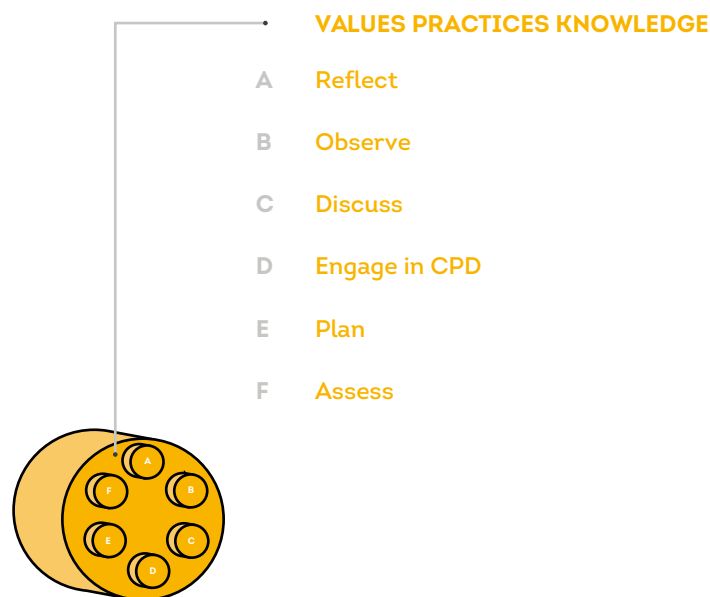
Some of the countries where we saw the most success in the QRP implementation have smaller populations (for example in Kosovo and Slovenia). The ability of a civil society institution to make this level of impact on a country with a much larger population may not be possible or may need additional support.

In the next section, we will present more specific findings related to how the resources have been used to address the competences on each level of a competent ECEC system.

3.2 INFLUENCING THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

3.2.1 Background information

The individual level looks at developing the knowledge, skills, and values of the ECEC workforce. As the members who participated in this documentation study are in-service training providers, the individual and also team level is where the QRP has shown the most impact across members.[11] In-service training and participation in other on-going professional development activities is acknowledged as essential for early childhood practitioners. The CoRe Report points out that becoming a competent practitioner is the result of a continuous learning process (Urban et al., 2011) and the European Quality Framework (EC, 2014:31) states that "ongoing professional development – provided it is of sufficient length and intensity – may be as important as pre-service qualifications in enhancing staff competence."

VALUES PRACTICES KNOWLEDGE

A   **Reflect**

B   **Observe**

C   **Discuss**

D   **Engage in CPD**

E   **Plan**

F   **Assess**

Continuous professional development in the countries where ISSA licensed members operate is obligatory. All member organizations who are part of this documentation study are on a list of approved providers from their national Ministries of Education and/or other respective bodies to provide training to fulfil these obligatory additional professional development requirements. (Primary teachers in this region are required to have at least a four-year university degree, and preschool teachers to have at least a three-year university degrees. This makes the region's requirements for working in a preschool more stringent than in some other places in the world.)

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11 – How the QRP has been used in higher education pre-service training will be presented under inter-institutional level because as in-service training providers, the NGOs only interface with pre-service providers.

However, required hours of continuous professional development for attestation or career advancement and whether teachers have received paid time to attend professional development activities vary greatly among different countries surveyed. In addition, the kinds of professional activities in which practitioners would receive paid time to be involved also varied. For example, approved professional development activities are limited to attendance at trainings or being mentored in some countries. In others, paid professional development activities also include being part of communities of practice/learning communities at the institutional level, such as in Slovenia.

3.2.2 Training, mentoring, and monitoring

The ISSA members reported that the QRP has provided a foundation for the training programs they offer, as well as tools for self and group assessment and for mentoring. All the members surveyed reported using the resources in training programs (80% of them used the QRP in mentoring processes, and 77% used it for monitoring teacher practice). Members stated that their implementation of the QRP had positively impacted teachers' practice, professional development and motivation, with a third of the members stating that the QRP's implementation had made a very large impact on practice.

100% **TRAINING**

80% **MENTORING**
77% **MONITORING**
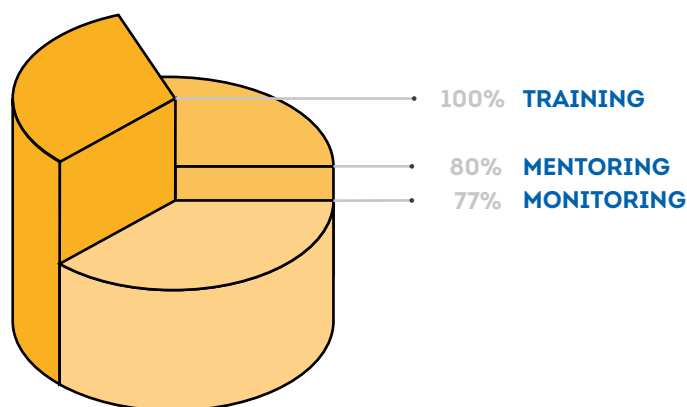
As the data indicated, training sessions were where the QRP was most used for individual professional development purposes.

> *"A lot of work had to be done with concrete activities with teachers so that they could understand how to recognize and implement quality in their own practice. Experience in small groups made it easier to expand. They didn't understand everything at the beginning as a whole, but went step by step, recognizing the importance of working with different focus areas."*
>
> *(Advisory Board member, Slovenia.)*

Based on the data collected, it is possible to draw some conclusions on what are the most common and useful ways of introducing the QRP into the system. In most cases, the members interviewed stated that they began with an introductory training session on what quality pedagogy is, and in some cases demonstrated this with videos and practical examples. In some cases, at the same introductory training session, they introduced all seven Focus Areas from the *Principles of Quality Pedagogy*. In other cases, they provided separate training on each focus area depending on members' professional development frameworks, the financial and human resources available for trainings, and information on practitioners' needs.

Using the QRP for mentoring (which included monitoring) was the case with the majority of members for educators' professional development.

> *"Mentoring had a large impact on teacher practice. Mentors can pose questions. Teachers can stay in their environment and still be working with their children".*
>
> *(Teacher/Trainer, Moldova.)*

It was also pointed out that mentors need to be properly prepared and the QRP was used in many of the training sessions to develop mentors.

> *"We see that the better use of our funding at this point is to invest in developing mentors in order to implement the National Teacher Standards for Kindergarten."*
>
> *(Funder representative, Moldova)*

3.2.3 Self and group assessment

Practitioners are generally encouraged to engage in self-assessment processes using the *Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and/or the *Professional Development Tools*. Mentors will also use them sometimes as well as the *Assessment Instrument* to mentor and monitor the teachers' improvements and also to plan for improvement in specific areas of practice.

Reflection is being increasingly seen as one of the most important competences needed in ECEC. It enables professional growth, as knowledge, skills and values need to be constantly adapted in highly unpredictable and diverse working contexts (Urban et al., 2011). The different tools/resources in the QRP all promote self- and group reflection on practice, and is even incorporated in the conceptual structure of the tools such as the *Professional Development Tools* and videos.

> *A teacher/trainer from Moldova noted that when teachers used the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy or Professional Development Tool to evaluate their own practice, they "scored themselves lower than they did on the National Instrument. They can see themselves better and what they need to do to move from good start to quality practice. It encourages them to continue their work."*

Working with peers and colleagues within their institutions is included at this level because group reflection on practice and even observing colleagues' practice (peer assessment, mentoring and support) help improve each individual's practice. This can be clearly seen, as all the ISSA members who were surveyed reported that the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* helps build a shared understanding of quality among those engaging in professional development opportunities. A large majority of the members (around 90%) find the other instruments in the QRP to support this, promoting trust-building and professional critical dialogue among practitioners.

The instruments in the QRP were also used by educators to observe their peers. Peer observations or 'open lessons' were highly encouraged in the Step by Step by Step Programme, and was accepted by most Departments of Education, even if funding to provide for substitute teachers so that educators could visit each other was not often provided, making it a more difficult activity for educators to engage in. Where educators are supported to engage in open lessons, the QRP has been shown to be an effective tool for supporting this form of professional development.

> *"We started to accept observations of other professionals in our classrooms as something good, something that could help us in understanding that our practice is part of the improvement process, and that we are good teachers."*
>
> *(Primary school teacher, Croatia)*

> *'Teachers also observe each other; they call this process 'open lessons'. After observation, during rest time for children, they reflect on and discuss what they have seen in those lessons they provided from October until the middle of December and from March till April. Activities are also organized for teachers from other preschools to whom they provided mentoring".*
>
> *(Mentor at Training Center, Armenia)*

"Teachers can use the Tool to take notes and structure what it is they are looking for in an observation."

(Teacher/Trainer, Moldova)

"The Step by Step Program had observation processes that looked at good points and improvements instead of looking for and finding errors. This makes teachers more willing to open their doors."

(Kindergarten teacher, Slovenia)

"In the process of mentoring based on QRP each teacher provided a kind of demonstrative lesson for a group of other teachers. It gives us 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)

"It gives me an opportunity to help other teachers, as I have implemented the child-centered approach for several years and I have gained more experience in its implementation."

(Primary school teacher, Armenia)

Peer observations can be seen as both observing each other's classrooms and using video coverage to share their practice. Then by using different tools from the QRP, teachers engage in group reflection processes. Physically visiting other teachers' classrooms while working together with children is seen as valuable. However, they also require funding to have substitute teaching staff taking over those classes of teachers who are observing or covering for them during those teachers' breaks. It also requires substantial work on trust-building for this kind of practice, especially in systems where practice has been very much seen as a 'private matter' by teachers.

Principles are important in guiding teachers' work, but so are the processes that promote on-going self- and group reflection on practice. When standards/principles are dictated by others, without allowing for practitioner reflection or discussion on what they mean, they are empty words that are neither understood nor put into practice.

3.2.4 Examples of how the QRP was used at the individual/group level

Linking theory with practice by using QRP

(Example from the Step by Step Program in Moldova)

The *Professional Development Tool* helps trainers/mentors and teachers plan new activities for growth. They can look for other kinds of activities they can do in the classroom that would increase the level of quality and then refer to the *Putting Theory into Practice* Guidebook that explains the theory around the activities under each indicator.

The Guidebook, *Putting Knowledge into Practice*, is used most often in training mentors, in mentoring, and in professional discussions/group reflection, but is also used in training. The trainers/mentors stated that the Guidebook also offers teachers the theoretical support they need for defending and promoting a more child-centered practice. Whereas many of the trainers originally felt that *Step by Step Program Moldova* focused on practice instead of on theory, which is what made it more interesting to them. Teachers now understand how to defend what they do in the classroom to inspectors and sometimes even families who question them.

It also provided them with more in-depth understanding of their own practice, children's needs and child development in general. The original pre-service training they received was too theoretically based, with little understanding of how to put it into practice. The QRP supported them in making the connection between the theory and practice.

In cases where new teachers are being introduced to the materials as participants in new projects, they will see examples of noteworthy practice both from the ISSA Video Library and those created by the trainers/teachers themselves in Moldova. They also have teachers who do not use the Step by Step methodology to observe classrooms. However, in both cases, they stated they would like more training on how to create and use the videos, as well as how to observe.

"Using videos of teachers' practice with the Professional Development Tool helps teachers notice that their practices are becoming more intrinsic, that they have internalized many of the principles and indicators."

(Teacher trainer, Moldova).

Using QRP in mentoring
(Example from Step by Step Benevolent Foundation in Armenia)

The Step by Step Benevolent Foundation in Armenia has many years of experiences in mentoring. In their case, the concept of mentoring has a broader meaning in terms of supporting individual teachers and the whole school in quality improvement. Mentoring using the QRP is done at four levels.

1) Level of the classroom teacher. Mentoring consists of different processes of supporting teachers including the QRP in observations in classroom, reflection meetings after observation, face-to-face mentoring, consulting, team-mentoring and co-teaching. Support comes from inside the school through mentors who were trained for this role and/or from outside of the school through the Foundation staff or trainers from training centers that were established by this NGO.

2) Mentoring students from pre-service training. In this case, staff from the preschools act as mentors to the students. In addition, SBSBF trains higher education teachers on mentoring and professional development with the Professional Development Tool in order to connect the theoretical and practical training of students.

3) Level of mentoring is focuses on mentoring a group of teachers from the same school that represents a learning community. In this case, mentoring is provided by teachers or mentors from the same school, who had been trained in mentoring Foundation staff. Schools cover the costs for outside services but mentors from the school are not paid for this work.

4) Mentoring across preschool/schools using Foundation training/mentoring centers. The Foundation has established training centers to assist teachers working in other schools or preschools in the region. Here, once again, mentors are using the Professional Development Tool for analyzing, planning, implementing and reflecting on educational practice to help other schools that are engaging in quality improvement processes.

3.3 INFLUENCING THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

3.3.1 Background information

In this diagram, we point out three ways that the QRP can be used to increase institutional competences, through developing: communities of practice within preschools/schools; collaborative management and participatory leadership within institutions; and a shared vision/inclusive culture among the staff of the institution.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

A Communities of Practice

B Shared Vision and Inclusive Culture

C Shared Leadership
and Collaborative Management

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

3.3.2 Communities of Practice

Innovation, inspiration, and enablement can be fostered in communities of practice or professional learning communities. They increase the level of professionalism of the practitioners and the quality of service provided to the children and families they serve. Learning communities in institutions are increasingly seen as a good strategy for professional development and for enacting the kinds of change that are necessary in early childhood service systems. They help practitioners take ownership for setting the course for changes they would like to see happen, as well as supporting them in the change process by providing them with the resources and time to collaborate and to learn and unlearn together (Osher, 2012).

"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".

"We are learning during the planning and reflecting meetings and are more and more confident that we are doing well. At the beginning, we had a lot of worries that the results would be visible and that's why there was a lot of uncertainty. Relaxation came at that moment when we recognized that if you did something wrong there was somebody who would help you solve the problem. [...] Teachers now also talk about each other's shortcomings or mistakes and this would have never happened before. Now they are able to express what they learned, what was new for them, and how they would do things differently. It helps a lot, as they have the support and guidance in the Tool for Professional Development and this supports their discussion."

(Deputy Director, primary school, Armenia)

"The cooperation with other teachers helps me a lot in this process and I don't feel that I am alone in this process".

(Primary school teacher, Armenia)

"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. The work in the learning communities helps them understand their own strengths".

(Director of primary school, Slovenia)

However, experience has proved that institutional/program management can only support these kinds of communities through arranging the structural conditions for them to exist, including:

* 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) in which to monitor and evaluate practices;
* guidance for staff, showing appreciation, and ways to document growth.

Fifteen members reported using the QRP in professional learning communities and found the resources very useful in supporting communities of practice. Most of these members used the QRP in peer mentoring/peer observation activities in the learning communities through:

* focusing on observations of practice while engaging in live observations of other classes or by watching practices in video clips;
* documenting their observations as examples of practice by using observed examples as evidence of meeting certain principles or recommended practices;
* reflecting on whether the documented practices are meeting their desired goals for themselves and for the children and families with whom they work;
* planning for different kinds of practices that may help them better meet these goals.

"The Professional Development Tool gives us direction on what and how to change in our practice and supports professional discussions among members in the professional learning communities (PLC) [...] Members of our PLC recognized the difference in the operation of the group and their improvement before and after they received this resource."

(Primary school teacher, Croatia)

In Moldova, a faculty member from I. Creanga Pedagogical University pointed out that training for teacher assistants is much more challenging as the pay is so low and the turnover is so high. In Slovenia also, the communities of practice included teaching assistants. A member of the Advisory Board for the Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step in Slovenia stated that "as teachers and teaching assistants are working together in the classroom, it is important to also be together in the professional learning process (for example, in a professional learning community) and to cooperate in the process of changing their practice in the classroom".

3.3.3 Collaborative management and shared leadership

Leadership is influencing, motivating, and enabling others to contribute to an organization's success. Leaders set goals and directions, challenge the norm, inspire, model and seek new ways of working towards goals. Leaders can be formal, designated leaders or informal 'opinion' leaders. Management involves managing tasks and working conditions; it organizes, directs and controls to achieve stated goals. Both are needed within an institution or program. Although they are often seen as being the same function done by a person 'in charge,' the data in this documentation study suggests that responsibilities could be distributed.

A strategy used to share leadership in an institution in two of the countries where the more in-depth data was collected (Croatia and Slovenia) was **leadership training for the facilitators of communities of practice/learning communities**. These

facilitators specifically receive ongoing and continuous training and meetings at least three times during the school year as opportunities for learning and sharing from the ISSA member 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)*

Eleven of the members stated that the QRP had made an impact on the leadership and management of the educational institutions. Where practitioners also became trainers and mentors in the Step by Step Programs, it was also observed in the countries where more in-depth data was collected that the more empowerment for practitioners there was, the more their institutions became democratic, valuing educators' voices in their management processes, as well their professional development processes.

Those interviewed for this study confirmed that having teachers engaged in peer observations was seen as a start for collaborative management and participatory leadership processes, as well as an activity that is part of engaging in communities of practice. When teachers open their doors, talk with other teachers, and define quality together, they are managing their professional development as well as influencing the culture of the pre/school to be more open and inclusive of diverse behaviors.

We also learned that leadership at the institutional level can refer to how teachers are included in professional learning communities. Not all teachers have the same interest in being involved at the same level. Others may be interested in improving quality through a different topic from the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy*, such as through a particular content area (for example math). When school directors have a knowledge of how professional learning communities work (some have been introduced to such methodologies) and know their staff's needs, they can be supportive of letting teachers form their own communities around their personal and group interests. However, they do need tools that help them evaluate whether or not teachers are making progress in quality improvement, as well as meeting the mission and vision of their institution.

> *"Learning communities empower those who work in kindergartens to organize and look more deeply into quality improvement processes. They can decide the road. It is important to put power into the hands of those that work, involving them into decision-making processes, and to democratize. Without cooperation, kindergartens may get stuck with the mistakes."*
>
> *(Advisory Board Member in Slovenia)*

3.3.4 Shared Vision/Inclusive Cultures

The goal of any institution or program should be to provide for its members' and users' needs. An institution's culture and climate sets the tone and focus regarding the relationships and interactions between leaders/management, staff and the children, families, community members and the other stakeholders it serves. When an institution shows respect for and includes everyone, values diversity, and uses democratic approaches and strategies to ensure that these values are acted upon, then practitioners share a common language and are better able to support each other in creating and maintaining an inclusive culture.

The institution's culture sets the tone of whether the institution/program is a critically reflective community that reciprocally interacts with the changing needs of children, parents, the local community, and wider society, and how it understands its role as a forum for civil engagement that fosters social cohesion (Urban et al., 2011).

Data collected through program surveys and in-depth data collection documents that the members and the institutions that are using the QRP to increase quality practices have climates that promote diversity and inclusion. ISSA annual program surveys in the last five years have provided information about members' work on inclusion of children with special needs and social inclusion of Roma children and families showing that this has been a major area of focus for them and

significant numbers of teachers have attended trainings around how to enact inclusion. Some members reported using the QRP, or parts of it or developed new resources to work directly with educators, kindergartens and schools focusing on inclusion of Roma children or children with special needs.

In addition, six members report working directly alongside parents with the materials in the QRP. Focusing parent support and education work on what is quality practice can be effective in changing parents' attitudes towards early childhood education and their own role in helping their children, as documented in the Wide Open School in Slovakia's work in the Roma Confident Parents Program. Parents can become stronger advocates for quality in the children's educational experiences, and having materials such as the Advocacy Leaflets for Parents can help them with the language and processes that can bring this about.

3.3.5 Examples of how the QRP was used at an institutional level

The following examples both demonstrate the development of communities of practice, expanding leadership roles by developing and supporting facilitators for these communities of practice, and creating inclusive cultures. In the case of the Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step Slovenia, a more inclusive culture was promoted through having practitioners document their own examples of good practice, showing how quality can be seen through a prism of context. In the case of the Open Academy Step by Step Croatia, a more inclusive culture was promoted in schools through a project that focused on helping schools be more inclusive.

Using the QRP in learning communities to document their own examples of good practice
Example from the Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step in Slovenia

The Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step engages practitioners in learning communities by first having them attend an introductory workshop on the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* to begin to connect practice with theory in their particular institution. Over a period of **two years**, they will also attend workshops on each of the Focus Areas in the Principles.

Before attending each workshop about a particular Focus Area, the participants do a self-evaluation on where they think their practice is on the quality continuum. While at the workshop, they work in small groups looking for examples of quality from their own practices as well as looking at photographs and videos that may demonstrate quality related to certain indicators in that Focus Area. They record reflections in their personal logbook/diary on what they are changing in their practice. At the next training workshop, trainers begin with teachers' reflection on the achievements and challenges encountered in their efforts for improvement, as they've been documenting them in their diaries. In this way, trainers support teachers' learning processes through documentation and teachers learn why documentation is meaningful.

In addition to the workshops on the Focus Areas that the practitioners are attending, each learning community chooses a Focus Area on which they would like to work further to deepen their understanding of the content in that specific Area. Some communities choose their strong areas to start with and others choose those where they feel they would need to grow more. They also create an improvement plan for what they would like to change before the next workshop.

Teachers in the learning community observe each other in order to see the theory in the *Quality Resource Pack* put into practice and are always following the Focus Area/Principle that the learning community has chosen as the main topic for that period of time. Observations are done in ways that look at the positive points and improvements in practice, rather than looking for and finding errors. The Centre's staff also visits schools to model how to do observations as well as how to provide feedback information on the observations during the learning community meetings.

The Centre has also developed its own **video materials** to illustrate particular indicators under learning environment, learning strategies, and interactions. Practitioners are trained in how to video record their own practice as well as to record examples of practice they observe during peer mentoring sessions to be discussed in the learning community sessions.

Professional discussions are then facilitated around the peer observations or around the videos recorded and how they reflect the *Principles of Quality Pedagogy*. The practitioners use an adaptation of the *Professional Development Tool* created by the Centre whereby practitioners add and discuss other examples of good practice from their observations and videos.

Instead of using the Professional Development Tool to rate other teacher's practice, the members of the learning community identify their own examples of good practice, reflect on them, and plan for improving quality. This is an example of empowering monitoring and evaluation. They document what is good practice as well as how practice changes over time. Their challenge is now getting this documentation uploaded to the network level to explore whether the data can support the hypothesis that this kind of practice improves educators' practices. The new webpage being introduced will now encourage to upload this kind of information. Engaging in peer observations or being videoed also seems to be most useful and meaningful to teachers when they felt less threatened by the tool being used. When evaluation and documentation focus on good examples, it is more empowering and motivating.

The Centre trains coordinators at each kindergarten in which a professional learning community has been set up. However instead of the training and meetings being focused on the child-centered approach, these are focused on how to manage the meetings they will facilitate, including how to get teachers to participate and share ideas. The training sessions reinforce the concept that the coordinators' role is to facilitate teachers' co-construction of knowledge using the *Quality Resource Pack* instead of being seen as the expert on child-centered practice in the community. If the coordinators are new to the Step by Step Network, they will attend a special introductory training on how to facilitate Peer Learning Communities with teachers, teaching assistants and even directors on why a quality child-centered approach is important for children's and their families' educational experiences.

Each of the learning communities is part of the larger network supported by the Centre. This will be further discussed under the section on inter-institutional competences.

3.4 INFLUENCING THE INTER-INSTITUTION LEVEL

3.4.1 Background information

The inter-institutional level can refer to inter-sectoral work in which early childhood educators and caregivers work with professionals from other sectors such as health and social services, to: create networks of institutions that work in the same area; develop strong partnerships with donors or government institutions; create partnerships between institutions of higher education and practitioners to increase research and professional development opportunities.

3.4.2 Connecting professions and professionals

At the inter-sectoral level, the QRP was used in Slovakia by the Wide Open School working on projects related to Roma children and families with local governance (the mayors' offices), health assistants and social workers who interact with preschool and primary educators. In the Ukraine, the Step by Step Ukrainian Foundation trained medical staff and social workers to integrate children with special needs into mainstream preschools/kindergartens and primary schools. A special version of the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* was also developed to specifically address the needs of special-needs children and their families.

The QRP has also been used as a tool to promote a shared understanding among ECEC institutions through joint trainings and networking. Seventeen members stated that they felt that the QRP had made an impact in connecting teachers from different institutions. As building a shared understanding of quality is one of the goals of the QRP, the ability of the resources to promote a shared language among institutions around quality appears to be helpful.

"Networking is so important. Institutions should not be alone in providing professional development.

Through well-governed networking, we can also keep the positive direction of the network. Teachers who are not part of the network may try new ideas, but only shadow the practices. They do not know why they do the things they do, or how they know that they are doing the right things."

(Advisory Board Member of the Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step in Slovenia)

A Cross-institutional Learning Community

Example from *Step by Step Program Moldova*

A professional learning community has started operating in the last three years in Chisinau, facilitated by the Director of the Step by Step model site who is also on the NGO's staff. Twenty-one institutions that implement the Step by step Approach and five other institutions have participated regularly in monthly meetings with another seven which are also interested in joining. This action was inspired after the facilitator attended an ISSA network workshop on professional learning communities in Slovenia in 2005 and another workshop on the WANDA method for implementing a professional learning community.

The community started with around ten people at a meeting and now sometimes up to 30 will attend depending on the topic and their own availability. In total, over 200 people have been involved in these meetings. Sometimes the topics will relate just to a specific group such as kindergartens or primary schools and sometimes they relate to a broader audience. Teachers from gymnasia have even attended and have brought materials to share with others. The meetings address challenging questions and are always interactive. The themes for the meetings are chosen from surveys taken regularly to present topics of high interest. An example of one of the topics discussed was, *How to promote a positive attitude towards learning in the school*. The location of the meetings changes from school to school and they may also include engaging in observations at the site. They might observe practice demonstrated in a video brought by one of the participants. They also use one of the *Professional Development Tools* or the *Assessment Instrument* to help structure the observations and follow up with discussions during the meetings.

From the in-depth data collected from Armenia about the role of the QRP on integrated approaches at the inter-institutional level, we can learn a lot. The common understanding of quality indicators among faculty teachers, faculty supervisors who are in charge of students' practice, teachers and mentors, needs to be established in advance and checked regularly in order to provide appropriate integration of theory with practice and a common understanding of different concepts as they work in theory and practice. It is important that students are receiving clear messages from all staff involved in their schooling, both in faculty and during practicum. In this process, QRP can play the role of connecting glue among faculty staff and preschool and primary school staff. SBS BF can play the role of a facilitator in this process and also as a provider of opportunities for continuous development for those who are involved in the process. This is a challenge which requires a lot of changes on different levels of the system.

A Network of Learning Communities

Example from the *Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step* in Slovenia

Networking in Slovenia is done at several levels. Each kindergarten is connected to another so that the staff also has the opportunity to see and experience another kindergarten's learning community as well as being connected to the larger network through each learning community's coordinators and directors. The staff is also connected to the larger Step by Step Network during professional development activities, regional and network professional meetings, and participation in conferences.

Leadership of this network is strategically supported through a Network Advisory Board consisting of representatives of network members, center staff and other professionals. The Advisory Board reflects on the network's activities and proposes content and processes for the future development of the network.

A Centre Core Team staff member commented on how connected the learning communities' members feel to one another and how much they support each other. "Teachers and institutions should not be alone. By including new members into the network, those who have been a part of it for a time refresh their thinking about what is important" (Trainer). Networking around the QRP is so important to understanding child-centered approaches. A teacher interviewed pointed out that "Being part of a network helps us connect with children's needs and to understand children better." An Advisory Board Member stated that being part of network of learning communities helps practitioners:

- promote active ways of learning in their settings;

- engage in self-evaluation and reflection on their practice;

- facilitate classroom observations in such a way that teachers welcome them;

- participate in important seminars and other workshops;

- enhance new knowledge and experiences.

Beyond providing training sessions for the institution staff on the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and for the coordinators on how to facilitate their learning communities, the Core Team staff from the Centre also facilitates annual regional and network meetings where the coordinators and teaching staff (teachers and teacher assistants) of each kindergarten's learning community attend, where there are exchanges of practice among them and reflection/planning meetings. They are also looking into how to improve ongoing communications within the network in discussions on the development of communication strategies. One outcome so far has been the site on the Centre's webpage for members to share their ideas, challenges and successes.

3.4.3 Partnerships with funders and government education institutions

For some members interviewed, their most helpful partnerships with implementing the QRP were the donors that were interested in investing in a particular area. This would include UNICEF Country Office involvement in the Global Partnership for Education project in Moldova, their interest in funding inclusion in Croatia, or in multilingual kindergartens in Kyrgyzstan. It also includes USAID's work in improving reading and writing for primary-age children in Macedonia, Liechtenstein's Development Program in developing community-based kindergartens in Moldova, or Good Neighbours of South Korea's work in Mongolia in mentoring support. The Step by Step Benevolent Foundation Armenia's Director pointed out that, "These organizations do not have instruments to prove any progress or improvement in quality, and therefore may look to ISSA's." In other cases, such as in the Ukraine, Moldova and Croatia, strong allies in implementing the QRP are international funders within the country who want to provide more and better inclusion of special-needs children in mainstream classrooms.

Several members (Qendra Hap pas Hapi Albania, Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosova Education Center, Foundation for Education Initiatives Support Kyrgyzstan, and Wide Open School Slovakia) stated that the Ministry of Education and other government entities (such as municipal governments in Slovakia) have been major allies in the implementation of the QRP.

> *"Until 2010, there had been differences between ISSA's definition of quality and the requirements in national policy documents, but now on paper, the approaches are almost the same. The problem appears in implementation as we are working with a huge number of schools and teachers. I am working directly with 51 schools. The implementation level is low, and mentoring is the weakest point in this process. We provide training and monitoring, but mentoring is missing. Additionally, we rarely provide observations in classrooms with any reflection. In only in two schools out of 51 did I manage to provide mentoring."*
>
> *(Head of Primary Education department, Branch of National institute for Education, Armenia)*

However, nine members indicated that in their cases, the governmental institutions neither supported nor opposed to their work on quality improvement. It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that in some cases the lack of interest from the government did not affect the impact that the work with the QRP had on the professional development of teachers, as those members who indicated the lack of government or opposition support were among those who had been very active in using the resources, and reported significant changes in the practice.

"The whole system of our work is still marked with the position of power and in this policy, it is hard to expect any changes for now. Other advisers haven't noticed any mistake in the existing system. [...]. The content of our work is defined in a top-down way. Informally, we exchange information, but in general, each of us has her/his own vision about the definition of quality as a result of the fact that defining quality in the national regulation of education is very formal and mainly only done on paper."

[...] "The system itself is ruining the professionalization of the field and there is no will to change anything, but some individuals who work in government institutions are able to overcome this situation".

[...] "QRP gives a clear structure and this structure is usually missing in the professional development programs that are established in our national system." [12]

(Advisor at Regional Office of the Education and Teacher Training Agency, Croatia)

3.4.4 Partnerships with higher education institutions

Although ISSA and its members focus more on in-service professional development activities, they have also worked with higher education institutions who provide pre-service professional development, recognizing the high importance of initial preparation for professionals. Ten of the members surveyed stated that they had made an impact in this area. In some countries, the ISSA staff members and trainers were also on the faculty at higher education institutions in their countries, which may have helped them have a larger impact.

Working with Higher Education institutions
Example from the *Step by Step Benevolent Foundation* in Armenia

The Step by Step Benevolent Foundation introduced the QRP at one of the pedagogical institutes in Armenia where the Dean of the Faculty was a board member and trainer for them. As Armenia is in the process of modernizing their teaching processes and content of programs, education faculties are becoming more aware that they need new content, tools and materials in order to meet the new Law on Education, including the recommendation to education faculties to become more open to community and other organizations in the educational field.

The Foundation provided separate training workshops for students on the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and the development of lesson plans. Higher education staff have received training on the ISSA Principles, as well as how to provide mentoring using the *Assessment Instrument* and the *Professional Development Tool* in their student practicums.

The students who were interviewed for this study stressed that after participating in the workshop, they better understood how the theory they had covered in their lessons at the pedagogical institute looked like in practice, as well as being able to understand the child-centered approach. They also recognized the importance of collective efforts to achieve quality in the sense of creating a community of learners, teachers, parents and other community members who support children's learning.

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12 – In many cases, the professional development programs are top-down designed, focusing on priorities defined by the ministry or governmental agencies.

Working with Higher Education Institutions

Example from *Step by Step Program Moldova*

One of founders of the *Step by Step Program* in Moldova decided to change the emphasis from retraining kindergarten teachers to supporting pedagogical institutions, in order to do it correctly from the beginning. In this case, the staff from five pedagogical institutions were chosen and trained on how to use the QRP.

Faculty from the I. Creanga Pedagogical University developed modules for both undergraduate and masters-level students based on the QRP, and having students use the *Professional Development Tool* in observations they made of practicing teachers during their internships. The university staff is also using the Guidebook, *Putting Knowledge into Practice,* to support the instruction in the labs and making use of videos to show examples of good practice. Some of the masters-level students are also using the Guidebook for background material on their thesis. The faculty stated that "the *Professional Development Tool* is helping not only their students understand the meaning of quality, but that it is also increasing their own level of understanding."

Other members (Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step Bosnia and Herzegovina, Step by Step Czech Republic, Step by Step Community Foundation Kazakhstan, Foundation for Education Initiatives Support Kyrgyzstan, and Step by Step Foundation for Educational and Cultural Initiatives Macedonia) stated that one of their main allies in implementing the QRP are the higher education institutions.
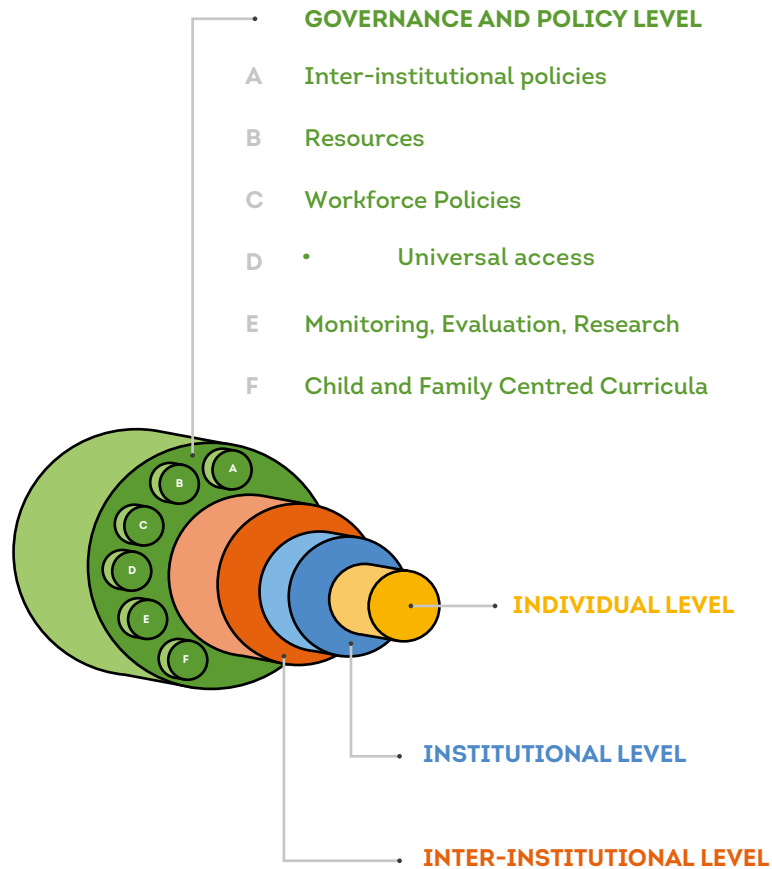
In spite of these successes, it was also found that working with higher education institutions in some cases can be frustrating for the members when higher education faculties are not that familiar with child-centered pedagogy themselves or the resources in the QRP. An understanding of child-centred quality practice can also be distorted unless there are ample opportunities for everyone to reflect on what the ISSA Principles mean in practice. In some of the interviews, members stated that the higher education/pre-service institutions use teaching methods that are not learner-centred and which focus mostly on theory, making it very difficult for new teachers to be able to implement child-centred methods in their teaching. Some even went so far as to say that opposing attitudes sometimes sabotage efforts to make systems more child-centred.

In addition, even when staff from pedagogical institutions are very familiar with the QRP and child-centred methodology, using the QRP in higher education can be discontinued. An example of this occurred in Slovenia when the ISSA member's strategy six years ago was to focus on work with higher education. Through a connection between one of the three largest pedagogical faculties in the country and four of the staff from the Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step working at the University, pre-service students, as well as students working on higher-level masters and Ph.D degrees were introduced to the QRP in their university coursework, in their practicums, and through seminars. With staff turnover (a key person's retirement) and changing institutional priorities, this initiative has since been greatly diluted.

The data from the surveys and in-depth data collection supports the conclusion that when working with higher education institutions, having a shared vision and a strong leadership is what best supports the development of a strong partnership. It is most likely to occur when higher education faculty are either trainers or on the board of members.

3.5 INFLUENCING THE GOVERNANCE AND POLICY LEVEL

3.5.1 Background information

GOVERNANCE AND POLICY LEVEL

A Inter-institutional policies

B Resources

C Workforce Policies

D • Universal access

E Monitoring, Evaluation, Research

F Child and Family Centred Curricula

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

There is a need for policies that support a strong workforce including working conditions and professional development, which are essential components of quality services. There is also a need for policies to encourage and support inter-sectoral/inter-institutional cooperation, collaboration, coordination and integration of services. In addition, policies need to provide the financial, structural, and human resources that are required for quality ECD services and for the monitoring and evaluation of programs that empower all stakeholders to use the data provided to improve quality. Policies that expand public outreach to be more inclusive of all children and families, promote child and family-centered programming and provide universal access to quality ECD services ensure that children's and families' rights are fulfilled, creating equitable societies with better social cohesion.
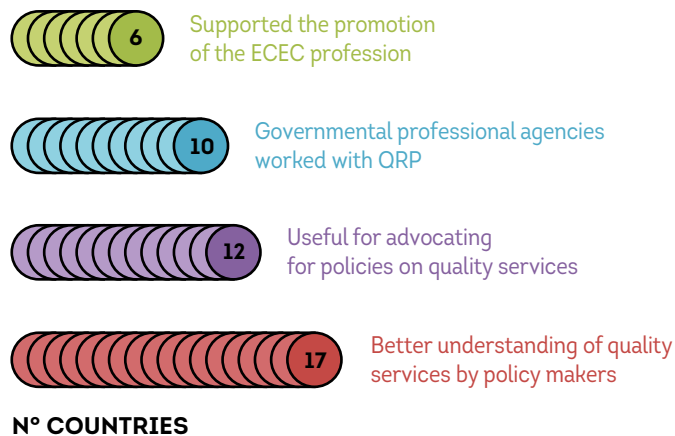
3.5.2 Defining national standards for teachers

ISSA Principles role in defining National Standards

2 Adopted

4 Greatly influenced

11 Somewhat influenced
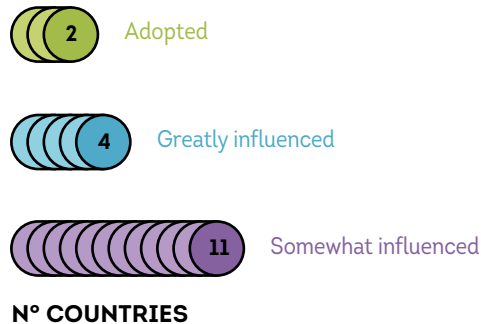
N° COUNTRIES

The QRP has supported members to work at the policy level in their respective countries, especially in the case of promoting the adoption of national standards for preschools and primary schools that had been influenced by the previous ISSA Pedagogical Standards or current ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy. Fourteen members stated that ISSA's Principles somewhat influenced the national standards. Four members stated that they greatly influenced them, and in two countries (Kosovo and Albania), the ISSA Principles were adopted as the national standards.

3.5.3 Increasing education authorities' competences

QRP and increasing education authorities' competences

6 Supported the promotion of the ECEC profession

10 Governmental professional agencies worked with QRP

12 Useful for advocating for policies on quality services

17 Better understanding of quality services by policy makers

N° COUNTRIES

Seventeen members felt that the QRP helped policy makers understand what quality ECEC services entail, and over half of the members found it to be useful for advocating for policies on quality services. Six members stated that work with the QRP helped promote the importance of the ECEC profession in their countries, helping to get better working conditions and salaries for practitioners.

Ten members worked with the QRP with governmental professional agencies, such as inspectors and other agencies involved in quality assurance, showing that QRP can influence those agencies' definition of quality practice. Examples of this include the *Mongolian Education Alliance*, training a group of approximately 70 municipal educational authorities to act as mentors in 31 districts, and the *Pedagogical Institute* of Montenegro which trains inspectors in the QRP so that they can act additionally as mentors in the classrooms. In this case, the traditional role of inspectors has been to come to classrooms and assess teachers without using a reliable instrument. Training inspectors to use the *Assessment Instrument* as well as other QRP resources can change their role and the assessment process, so that it can become more empowering and supportive for practitioners.

"It would be useful to involve representatives of national educational authorities in creating and evaluating QRP materials, in the processes of gathering their opinions about the materials, etc. It would help activate them and accept those materials as a base for their everyday work with schools and teachers".

(Head of Primary Education Department, Branch of the National Institute for Education, Armenia)

3.5.4 Monitoring, evaluation and research

The CoRe Report (Urban et al., 2011) also points out that quality ECEC programs are based on a well-balanced combination of theory (academic research) and practice (practical experiences in ECEC settings). Reflexive practitioners can contribute substantially to the body of knowledge, skills and values associated with quality practice through researching their practice and experiencing specific professional development.

In this sense, the QRP tools have been more often used by members (around 18–20) for monitoring teachers and self-assessment, encouraging self- and group reflection, and less for evaluation and research, especially action research. In only one case, one staff member used the tools for research purposes for a PhD thesis.

Monitoring and evaluation are most often done by administrators and inspectors, which may not be the most empowering form of professional development for educators. When connections are made to higher education institutions that can use classroom observations as participatory research co-conduct research and gather data with the educators, then the knowledge gained from that research can be seen as more useful to the educators, and also empowers them to make the changes they see as necessary because they have more understanding of what needs to be done, as well as how to do it.

The data from the study suggests that this occurred where there were strong partnerships between schools/kindergartens and higher-education institutions. These partnerships were revealed when collecting more in-depth data in Slovenia and Armenia, but were also noted in other countries in the surveys such as Albania, the Czech Republic, Macedonia, and Montenegro.

There is much to be done to empower action research among practitioners, and to influence the monitoring and evaluation systems in ECEC systems so that they are driven by the intent to learn how to improve quality.

3.5.5 Implementation of child and family-centered curricula

Research (Oberhumer, 2005; Laevers, 2005; OECD, 2004) also supports the on-going evaluation and development of curricula that are child and family-centered by putting forth some theory on what makes it quality practice as well as collecting examples of best practice that can be disseminated. While the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* were never meant to be seen as a curriculum, it was always hoped that they could be used to influence the development of more children and family-centered curricula in the countries where ISSA's members work.

Many of the members have reported in Program Reports over the years of being involved in the development of their national curricula, bringing forth formal research studies that support the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy as well as their own experiences working with practitioners on how to introduce and implement child and family-centered methods in ECEC, as they did when the Step by Step program started in the 1990s.

The QRP offers tools for improving the quality of child-centered practices. This means that they can be used in ECEC systems where a child-centered approach is either intended or supported. All practices defined in the principles, indicators and examples require not only the value, knowledge and skills from educators, but also that the enabling conditions for such practices be enacted. The curriculum plays an important role in this case. As stated in this report, it is not just practitioners who need the tools, but also those working in pre-service training, quality supervision at individual institution and government levels, and even program-development levels.

3.5.6 Advocating for universal access to high-quality programs

Eight members reported using the QRP in advocating for quality universal access. While the majority of the members work for including vulnerable and disenfranchised children in ECEC in their counties, this was an area that ISSA is working to assist its membership with in terms of providing more materials and unified messages. The recent addition of the Advocacy Leaflets for policy makers, educators and parents is an example of this work. Seven of the eight members that reported translating and using the Advocacy Leaflets also reported working with advocacy as a main activity. Most reported feeling successful in this work. However, this is a level in which more work is needed.

3.6 INFLUENCING ALL THE LEVELS OF THE ECEC SYSTEM – AN EXAMPLE FROM KOSOVO

The following example describes how the Kosova Education Center (KEC), starting from a single pilot project, worked with the QRP to increase the levels of competences at all levels of the preschool/kindergarten system in Kosovo. The final results of the project mention 110 teachers working in 12 preschools, engaging in learning communities led by their directors and designated learning community coordinators as part of a network of institutions working on the implementation of the QRP. Also at the inter-institutional level, experts from the Ministry of Education, pedagogical institutes and local education inspectors and municipal officers were included in the initial design and final reporting on the results of the project. An evaluation of the pilot was conducted at the culmination of the project that included interviewing participants and observation in the classrooms (pre-post observation). Policy changes were required to include the adoption of the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy as the national standards for preschools in Kosovo.

How the QRP was implemented in Kosovo
by *Kosova Education Center*

The *Scaling Up Quality in the Early Childhood Development System in Kosovo* project was designed to create a network of early childhood professionals who support the implementation of high-quality, child-centered teacher practice through monitoring and feedback of teachers, utilizing selected tools from the ISSA QRP. The project was conceived to serve as a model for designing early education learning communities centered on quality improvement. This two-year project began in January 2014 and included the following:

- Finalising and disseminating *Putting Knowledge into Practice,* the *Professional Development Tool for Kindergarten*, the *Assessment Instrument* and *Methodology for using the Assessment Instrument*, including a database for recording the data after observation. This included having a group of local experts from the Ministry of Education, Faculty of Education, and inspectors review the Albanian version of the Assessment Instrument on whether any changes needed to be made. No substantive changes were made, only minor ones related to language.

- Building the capacity of the coordinators and trainers in the 18 preschools, schools, and community centers that participated in the project and the establishment of learning communities within kindergartens and between kindergarten at a national level as well as a handful of inspectors and municipal education officers. Coordinators received training on how to use the Instrument for Assessing Quality Practice, including two reliability observations followed by group discussions. KEC developed a learning community for coordinators by facilitating monthly coordinator workshops in different kindergartens. During the workshops, coordinators shared how they had used the tools and the quality improvement process of their kindergarten. The tools were used to evaluate colleagues as well as for self-evaluation. Initially, workshops focused on the use of the guidebook (the basic use of the tools); however, as the project progressed, the focus shifted toward assessment and data analysis.

- These monthly learning workshops centered on the QRP, and the subsequent impact on the kindergartens is the major focus of this evaluation. Notably, coordinators were given flexibility in determining the depth and frequency of observations and discussions that took place in their institution.

- Monitoring quality improvement: KEC designed its project to support coordinators, education inspectors, and municipal officers in monitoring the teachers in participating preschool institutions. The primary project goal was gathering data on the QRP as a framework for quality improvement of teacher performance. The hope is that education officers and inspectors in their respective municipalities will integrate the use of the QRP in their monitoring plan for early education institutions. This third component of the project continues to evolve as a result of government transitions. However, as of March 2016, the Kosovo Ministry of Education approved the *ISSA Quality Principles* as a national document, which is the first step in integrating the QRP framework into the ECD system in Kosovo.

Analysis of the data from this evaluation indicates that the *Scaling Up Quality in the Early Childhood Development System* project in Kosovo has a positive impact on quality improvement. The use of the ISSA Quality Resource Pack prompted teachers to conduct self-assessment and reflect on their practice with others. The monthly learning communities led by the Kosova Education Center also resulted in professional development of coordinators and directors. The introduction and use of the ISSA Quality Resource Pack has sparked the use of data to inform teacher practice and has resulted in an improvement of quality (Olmore, 2016).

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PART 4 | WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED AS AN INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FROM WORKING ON QUALITY?

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

This chapter features the main conclusions of the study as an exercise on reflection on the role of an international network in enabling changes in different early childhood systems by both involving its members in developing relevant and timing resources, and enabling and supporting them to use them.

The conclusions also refer to the lessons ISSA learned by working with a diverse membership in different country contexts on process quality improvement. The chapter makes reference to the conditions that best support continuous improvement of quality and the challenges in addressing quality systemically; and share the importance of creating and sustaining a democratic environment when working with all types of professionals, so that the generative power of innovations and the strive for professionalism are continuously nurtured. Valuing individuals, peer-learning, critical reflection and collegiality are crucial.

Practitioners, pre-service and in-service professionals, supervisors, pedagogical coordinators, and policy makers are invited to reflect on the pivotal role that networks (national or international) are playing in supporting changes and bridging practice, research and policy, when reflective, collaborative, empowering and democratic practices are embraced.

KEY MESSAGES

- The QRP is a versatile package, but its use depends greatly on the country context and the capacity and expertize needed for appropriate use.

- There is no single way of implementing the QRP. It can be used with any child-centred and democratic methodology and/or approach.

- The QRP works best in enabling conditions that sustain quality improvement and professionalism including the existence of social and democratic processes within the system at all levels; reflection on practice; support for risk taking.

- The most important challenges for non-governmental organizations in working towards quality improvement include: successful partnering with governmental agencies and higher-education institutions; ensuring financial resources for continuous engagement with key stakeholders; systems for documentation of changes; systems for monitoring and evaluation; and engagement in advocacy.

- A supportive and reflective network is powerful when it:

  ▷ values and facilitates peer learning and mutual support among its members and has the resources to enable such processes.
  ▷ continuously seeks to revisit its understandings through critical reflection and participatory mechanisms as knowledge evolves.
  ▷ appreciates practice as a source of knowledge to influence policies and research.
  ▷ believes in democratic values and practices them by giving credence to bottom-up changes in systems through innovations and validated 'know-hows', emanated from research and practise-based knowledge.

- No resource package can make dramatic changes in a system. The impactful use of the QRP has relied on:

  ▷ the long term commitment, competent expertise and capacity of the ISSA member organizations to implement child-centred philosophy and pedagogy.
  ▷ adapting the resources and approaches to country contexts, while remaining loyal to the values and their enacting principles unpacked in the resources.
  ▷ embracing and practicing democratic values and approaches when working with professionals at all levels in the system.

Based on the data from the study, we can conclude that ISSA members used the QRP to support their efforts to influence different levels of ECEC system in their respective countries.

- The QRP was found to be a versatile package that could be used by different audiences in different ways depending on the context (political and economic) of the education system in different countries, as well as the ISSA member's capacity and working relationship with educational government entities. The flexibility to be able to use them as a set of compatible tools and resources for training, continuous professional development, monitoring, evaluation, individual and group reflection, creating a shared vision, communities of practice, shared leadership inter-institutional and inter-sectoral cooperation and governance, were all documented in this study. This shows both their universal applicability and versatility.

> *"Tools in QRP are different, I think. Assessment instruments can be used as a tool by a wider audience: teachers, mentors, teachers and students in the higher education institutions. It is something very practical,*

so it is used more often. From theory to practice, the tools can be used by more 'mature' audience. So these documents can be considered as complementary, and we do not consider them as more or less useful."

(Ruzanna Tsarukian, director of SBS BF in Armenia)

- There is no single way of implementing the QRP. Rather, it is important to determine which tools and processes have the most useful impact on a country level, as well as how to find resources to enable their use. The fact that QRP can also be used in ways that go beyond assessment or monitoring tools, empowering teachers to be more autonomous and self-directed in their professional development is also of value to the profession. In order to be able to meet the many needs of their children and their families, teachers need to be able to reflect on what is working and not working and to make decisions that they can act upon as things come to the surface and change. Having common professional values and information that grounds them in their decisions helps them to be more responsive to the children and families.

"QRP materials presented us with a clear starting point for decisions about what to change and a kind of skeleton for the work to do. It brought structure and the feeling of security. [...] The indicators became a starting point for discussions among us."

(Primary school teacher, Croatia)

"We do not use the Professional Development Tool in the QRP as a monitoring or scoring tool, but as a framework for writing examples of good practice we that we observe. We look for proof under certain indicators as points of discussion."

(Mateja Rezek, staff member in SBS Center for Quality in Education, Slovenia)

- The complexity and diversity of tools in QRP provides ISSA's members with different opportunities to address existing challenges in their countries. Different approaches and entry points can be chosen to meet the needs on different levels of the ECEC system. Interdependence, as well as independence of the resources, provides members with the opportunities to focus on different aspects and modes of delivering CPD, on different levels of the system, as well as to translate research and theory into the practice, thus strengthening the foundations for a competent system.

There are **multiple uses**, in multiple contexts, with diverse capacities:

▷ for the professional development of educational and care staff and quality improvement of their practice (training sessions, self-evaluation, mentoring and working in professional learning communities or networks);

"This kind of professional development allows me to provide it in my own way and gives me self-confidence."

(Primary school teacher, Armenia)

"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)

"I use the tools even though I am not part of the group offering the Step by Step Program in my school because they are more practical and interactive than those provided by the Department of Education."

(Primary school teacher, Moldova)

▷ for capacity building, and as a tool for professionals who support quality improvement and professional development at the school level (e.g. school counsellors, school director/leaders/management, coordinator/person in charge for quality improvement or professional development on the school level);

▷ for capacity building and as a tool for outside professionals or institutions responsible for supporting quality improvement and professional development at the community, regional or national level (e.g. consultants of educational institutes);

▷ for improving pre-service training;

"During the lessons, we learned about a child as an object or subject of the educational process, but now we have opportunity to see in practice what it means being an object or a subject and how the education process looks like when children and teachers are subjects of the learning processes and co-construct this process."

(Student at Faculty for Education, Yerevan, Armenia)

"I knew what a child-centered approach is, but only when I started to be familiar with the QRP was I aware about everything that child-centered approach represents."

(Teacher at Faculty for Education, Yerevan, Armenia)

▷ for external monitoring and evaluation (supervisors, inspectors) and internal monitoring on the level of the service;

▷ for research purposes;

▷ for supporting Ministry of Education or other national agencies to define national guidelines for quality or quality standards;

▷ for raising awareness and advocating for quality pedagogy (parents, school board members, funders, local, national policy makers, the wider public, donors).

- The majority of members found the different resources in the QRP to be most useful for teachers in building a shared understanding of quality, for engaging in self-assessment, and continuous professional development and professional critical dialogue. The different resources were also useful in mentoring and monitoring teachers.

- The majority also found the resources to be useful in helping different audiences, including helping policy makers understand why we need quality and what it is. It should also be noted that members are adapting the resources as in the case of Ukraine's adaptations of the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* for teachers working with inclusion of children with special needs and Slovenia's adaptations of the Professional Development Tool. It was always intended that the resources be used in different ways by different members, depending on their own goals and contexts.

- The documentation also showed that the QRP worked best in enabling conditions that support the work on quality improvement, especially the government support for its implementation (such as in Albania and Kosovo) and the existence of policy and funding that supports educators' continuous professional development. This includes regulations for numbers of hours attended, paid leave for attendance, and career-ladder advancement through attendance of continuous professional development. In addition, the implementation of the QRP cannot be seen as a project that is finished after a year or so, but is a continuous, regular process that requires strategy development, financial resources and on-going support.

4.1 USING INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR ALIGNMENT WITHIN ECEC SYSTEMS

Having two international frameworks that promote the same values and competences has provided a stronger platform for ISSA members to advance the much-needed approaches in early years practices and policies on the country level. The two frameworks support each other. While the *European Quality Framework* defines more broadly the quality in ECEC on the level of the system, ISSA's *Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and the *QRP* offer even more tools to translate process quality principles into practice and influence the system in a more bottom-up approach. Both converge and contribute to promoting the same values within ECEC systems, and invites stakeholders to an open dialogue around quality and aspects which require changes and/or improvements.

The QRP provided ISSA members with an international framework for improving process quality within ECEC settings and a set of tools for increasing the competences of individual staff, of institutional teams, of the work between institutions, and of policies and governance.

While it proved to be a very helpful package of tools and resources for all ISSA members for training and mentoring practitioners, it was also successful for training institution's administrators, people from the Ministries of Education and other government educational bodies, inspectors, higher education faculty, parents and even in some cases the general public.

In 2014, the international quality framework on the European level was launched by the European Commission. Although with a much broader scope, regarding process quality, the European Quality Framework is very much aligned with ISSA's Quality Principles.

At the individual level, both the ISSA's QRP and the European Quality Framework acknowledge the importance of strengthening staff members' ability to provide high-quality pedagogy and stimulating learning environments as well as to engage in continuous professional development to fulfill their professional role. While developing common education and training programs for all staff, working in ECEC services helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality (EC, 2014, p. 9). So does the use of enabling tools, such as the ones in the QRP which can be used as the foundation of initial and on-going training, for individual and group reflection on practice, and for planning the improvement of practice.

The European Quality Framework (2014, p. 10) states the importance of providing for curricula based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches that celebrate the child's unique potential and holistic development. ISSA's QRP offers examples of quality child-centered practices that may support the preparation of future and existing teachers to better implement a child-centered curricula.

Collaboration with children, colleagues and parents are seen as crucial in the European definition of quality. Resources in the QRP are built on and support shared leadership and collaborative management, communities of practice, and the development of shared vision and inclusive cultures within institutions. The *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and accompanying instruments provided the foundation for discussions, collaboration, and cooperation among the stakeholders within the institution.

At the inter-institutional level, the QRP was used as a tool to promote a shared understanding among ECEC institutions through joint trainings and networking and implement partnerships with funders, government institutions, and institutions of higher education. This supported the European Quality Framework's (2014) actions to collaborate with partner organizations (p.11).

At the governance level, the ISSA Quality Principles acted as a model for creating national standards for ECD programs: increasing education authorities' competences, and implementing national child- and family-centered curricula. It also helped to support monitoring, evaluation, and research regarding ECEC services, and to advocate for universal access to high-quality ECEC services which were also outlined as important actions in the European Quality Framework (2014, pp.9–11).

Having two international frameworks that promote the same values and competences provided a stronger platform for members to advance the much-needed approaches in early years practices and policies on the country level. The two frameworks support each other. While the European Quality Framework defines quality more broadly in ECEC on the level of the system, ISSA's QRP offers the tools to translate process-quality principles into practice and influence the system in a more bottom-up approach. Both converge and contribute to promoting the same values within ECEC systems, and invites stakeholders to an open dialogue around quality and aspects of it, which require changes and/or improvements.

4.2 WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS THAT BEST SUPPORT CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT?

- Importance of social and democratic processes
- Reflection on practice
- Support for risk taking

4.2.1 Importance of social and democratic processes

All of the data from the study support the premise that social processes used in implementing the QRP from the ISSA member level through the practitioner level are as important in improving quality practice as the resources used. It was clear that participation in learning communities using the QRP has been one of the most useful and successful strategies in the ISSA network. We also have seen that where entire schools have used the QRP as their framework, they have been more likely to continue on the pathway for quality services (as defined by the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy*) than those who work in isolation from other teachers in their institutions.

We cannot separate the implementation of the QRP from how we use it (or from the processes). The QRP by itself cannot influence anything without appropriate processes and strategies for implementation. Only together can they influence ECEC institutions to improve the quality of ECEC service.

We learned that using the QRP helps educators be more focused on quality improvement, as the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* provide them a direction of where to go in their practice and what is important in child-centered approaches. It was the processes used that helped educators start to cooperate more among themselves on professional issues because they were using and discussing the same Principles. The processes and tools prompted them to share their ideas, elaborate their thoughts on a higher professional level, and open their classrooms to others. They can also help them be more determined in their communication about quality with professionals from other institutions which care for children (such as healthcare and social care institutions).

> *"I am much more capable of defining professional issues with words. Verbalization of professional things that are happening in my mind have become easier."*
>
> *(Primary school teacher, Croatia)*

As the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* are about promoting democratic processes in early childhood settings, they themselves must be and were implemented through democratic processes. Those processes give teachers opportunities to define, re-define, and to add new indicators or principles in the future, thus having them directly participate in defining quality.

No professional will be truly able to understand and then embrace democratic practices in their daily work with children and families if they have not themselves experienced democratic processes as learners themselves while being professionals. Their professional growth should be nurtured through giving and listening to different voices, having dialogue and

negotiating understandings, taking risks and making choices, participating in making decisions and taking responsibility, and valuing others/otherness.

4.2.2 Reflection on practice

Self- and group reflection are key competences that have been identified in many studies on professionalism and professionalization (Eurofound, 2015; Sharmahd, Peeters, Van Laere, Vonta, De Kimpe, Brajkovi , Contini, Giovannini, 2017). This is a skill that has to be introduced in pre-service training and has continued to be nurtured as vital to the life-long learning process. Competent governance, however, is also needed to support these processes in terms of paid time scheduled for them and supportive resources such as the QRP to frame the reflections.

An important lesson learned in this study has also been the importance of the discussions held around quality, such as reliability discussions which unpack concepts/constructs and understandings while allowing space for alignment through reflection on both theory and practice. Processes that do not necessarily promote scoring or ratings, but which promote reflection on a groups' definition of quality cannot be underestimated, whether they are based on a live observation in a classroom or impressions of what is seen in a video.

> *"Self-evaluation of your practice only inside the four walls of your classroom is very hard. By working with the QRP in professional learning communities, the process of self-evaluation has become much easier and objective."*
>
> *(Primary school teacher, Croatia)*

This level of reflection was seen to be important at the ISSA Network level, too. Those members who had representation in the group of ISSA Reliability Coordinators (the Step by Step Benevolent Foundation in Armenia, the Open Academy Step by Step in Croatia, Step by Step Czech Republic, the Center for Innovative Education in Lithuania, the Step by Step Foundation in Moldova, and the Step by Step Centre for Quality Education in Slovenia), engaged in a yearly reliability discussion around observations they would make in classrooms. All of those members also reported having reached the greatest numbers of practitioners in their countries with the QRP, as well as feeling that they made a high to very high impact on teachers' practices, professional development and motivation. A feeling of involvement through representation and leadership, as well as having opportunities for reflective discussions, seem to be factors in how impactful the QRP can be in influencing quality improvement.

4.2.3 Support for risk taking

Having an opportunity to take a risk and make an autonomous decision about what was right for their particular children and context was mentioned several times by those interviewed, and helped practitioners and institutions have ownership of the QRP. The resources could be adapted to reflect the current needs of teaching staff, the institutions and communities in which the resources were implemented, as well as the climate and context in individual countries. As seen in the cases in Slovenia, Armenia, Croatia and Moldova, teaching staff will take risks when they do not feel threatened; when they know that others are there to document what is positive, instead of penalizing for what is seen as potential areas of improvement.

> *"We feel safer. We have someone standing behind us and we take more risks."*
>
> *(Teacher, Slovenia)*

> *"The environment in the professional learning communities is more supportive. Teachers are more willing to take risks."*
>
> *(Director of school, Slovenia)*

It was also noted that having a framework helped teachers focus and contain their discussions and set expectations for the outcomes of those discussions. It kept them on-track and from veering off into areas where they may not (yet) feel prepared to go. They are also more likely to take risks when they are connected to other educators in group-reflection processes, such as in professional learning communities where they have more of a sense of belonging and professional security.

4.3 THE CHALLENGES IN WORKING TOWARDS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

- Partnering with governments
- Partnering with higher-education institutions
- Discontinued or project-based funding
- Documenting the changes in practice over time; monitoring and evaluation
- Expanding and supporting shared leadership
- Advocacy

ISSA's largest challenges with promoting the implementation of the QRP have revolved around the capacity of members in individual countries in terms of their size, their context, their funding sources, and their relationships with the educational authorities in the countries in which they work. The timing of changes that were needed in the countries have also played an important role in many cases.

Other challenges identified in the study are more based on a lack of policies that could be improved with higher levels of competences around governance, such as documentation/monitoring and evaluation/research, expanding and supporting more shared leadership, and more advocacy work to include public awareness.

4.3.1 Partnering with governments

In order to have greater influence using a bottom-up approach in which the civil society organizations lead the processes of change or innovation, it is necessary to partner with the governmental agencies. In some cases, members managed to cooperate successfully, especially in those contexts where their expertise greatly aligned with the governmental efforts, with their plans for policy change and implementation.

For some members, however, government-based or supported institutions have been a source of competition on the professional development 'market' because the governmental programs for on-going teacher training and continuous professional development (in many cases) are provided for free (as in Armenia, Croatia, Moldova, Mongolia, Slovakia, and Slovenia).

Even when there has been good initial cooperation between ISSA members and the Ministry of Education (as in the case of Moldova, where the previous *ISSA Pedagogical Standards* highly influenced the national standards), the implementation of the Standards can be understood differently at different levels, creating friction between those who have gone through processes to deeply understand what quality is and those who have not. Building a shared understanding requires dialogue and time, and in the case of governmental representatives, especially of those who play an important role in decision making and policy implementation, their participation in workshops meant to deepen the level of understanding is essential.

> *"National documents can become materials meant to control or punish teachers. The spirit of the materials can get lost in a culture that seeks to control teachers. The question is how much professionalism can be supported in a culture of control."*
>
> *(Funder representative, Moldova)*

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A challenging situation is when quality (as defined by ISSA Quality Principles) is too demanding for the contexts in which services operate. The gap is so large that they seem too remote. Therefore, they are hard to implement, even if there is government support. In this case, the power of civil society organizations is limited in terms of impacting a system, but may lead to informative examples coming from isolated cases regarding the changes that would be required.

The situations is more difficult in counties where the educational system is highly centralized. It will be interesting to follow the work done by the Kosovo Education Center and Qendra Hap pas Hapi in Albania, where the QRP is being used at the level of the Ministry of Education, to see if the changes necessary to have systems shift from teacher-centered to child-centered programs can be mandated.

4.3.2 Partnering with higher-education institutions

Although some of the members in their countries were able to establish strong connections with at least one higher-education institution, to do so across a region or country has been more difficult. The ways in which connections with higher-education institutions were established have mostly been through faculty being on the board of the member NGO, or working as trainers. In Moldova, a project funder identified work with higher-education institutions as a way to better sustain the changes that the QRP proposes. Yet, the institutions that were included in the project showed a much more limited understanding of child-centered approaches than the member's staff did, creating conflict about how change should proceed.

"At this moment, the Faculty of Education is in the process of modernizing its teaching process and the content of programs for future teachers. The goals of this process are very much in line with the goals pursued through the QRP.

The process influenced all teaching staff. They are aware that the programs are changing and that they will need new content, tools and materials to prepare future teachers for their profession.

Another important change regards the conceptualization and organization of the practicum. There have been changes in the way that Faculty establishes partnerships and cooperation with other organizations. They can invite organizations and individuals from outside to provide some activities for the Faculty and students. All these changes supported their idea to introduce QRP and connected the Faculty with the Step by Step Benevolent Foundation."

(The Head of Department at the Faculty for Education, Armenia)

Higher-education faculty in the region where the documentation for this study was gathered (with a few exceptions) have tended to be more conservative and less open to the participatory, democratic approaches proposed in the QRP. The one success for the majority of members working with higher-education institutions has been the ability to use the institutions supported by the ISSA member as sites for students to do their practicums.

4.3.3 Discontinued or project-based funding

A major challenge experienced by ISSA and its members has been the nature of how the NGOs fund their work around quality improvement, and the implementation of the QRP through projects financed by different donors (although around 40% of members also charge some fees). As a long-term donor, OSF has been the main supporter of ISSA and its individual licensed members in the work on quality over the past 20 years. However, the work is never finished and funding is essential in making a large and sustained impact.

As each member has a different donor base with different goals and expectations, the QRP has not been evenly implemented among them.

"It was much easier to implement old Pedagogical/Teacher Standards, as we received a certain amount of money for those processes and activities in the past. Currently, for implementation of the QRP we can only

use the limited funds received from the Open Society Foundations – Early Childhood Program in London to cover translation and the printing of materials and the travel costs for staff meetings on the international level.”

(Staff member, Step by Step Benevolent Foundation, Armenia)

The survey pointed out that the majority of members support the implementation of the QRP through work funded by donors in projects. While members' engagement in projects show a breadth of the QRP's use from how to implement it as a tool that can promote the inclusion with special needs, to using it as a way to increase reading and math scores in primary schools in Macedonia, it also shows the limitations of sustaining the work. When professional development projects are over, the funding ends. There is no to limited ability to continue to evaluate and monitor the continued use of the QRP or quality improvement. In addition, in most of the countries where the QRP has been implemented through projects, there is much work still left to be done to build a foundation for a competent system, hindering the continued use of the QRP by those who were introduced to it.

“Regular funding, competent staff in NGO who would work only on this issue and will provide regular contacts with teachers and schools are all needed for any significant and sustainable impact of QRP implementation [...] We provided mentoring (on the PLC level and sometimes on an individual level) for 300–400 preschool teachers and 200–300 primary school teachers, but rarely are we able to provide monitoring activities for teachers. Less than 100 preschool or primary school teachers were involved in activities that will include monitoring. The main reason for that are the costs (staff and travel costs) for these kind of activities”.

(Staff member, Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia)

“Projects work when they are happening, but stop when they are over. We like being part of the Step by Step Network, working on a quality improvement. As we go along, we are internalizing more and know there is more to do.”

(Kindergarten Director, Slovenia)

The challenge of being funded through projects is even seen in the creation of learning communities. Learning communities have been placed in the Step by Step Program and in ISSA since their inceptions, even if they were not formally called 'learning communities'. The original Step by Step trainers and even some of the teachers in many of the members' countries are still meeting, reflecting and dialoguing about practice, and about working on improving quality. The concept of a 'network of support' has been continuously nurtured, as its role has been highly valued. A good example in this sense is the sub-regional informal network that has been created in the Balkans, among all ISSA members, who themselves supported the annual participation of their local networks of practitioners to a regional conference for kindergarten and primary school teachers, led by the Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, such initiatives need continuous financial and human resource support. This is where we see that the Slovenian Step by Step Centre for Quality Education's ability to finance its network through its members' fees has helped to sustain the work on quality improvement for larger groups of practitioners. The members from Croatia and Armenia stated that this same kind of fee structure to support a network could better sustain their own work with practitioners.

4.3.4 Documenting the changes in practice over the time; monitoring and evaluation

Documenting changes in practice that are the result of working with the QRP are challenging, both at the ISSA Network level and at the individual member level.

Under the framework of its 2011–2014 Quality Assurance and Improvement Strategy, ISSA has tried to document how the

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QRP was being used through an online portfolio where members could place information on the reach of their activities, which resources in the QRP they were using and how they were using them. While quantitative data was easier to collect, the qualitative data was less rich, and more anecdotal, requiring time for members to translate and upload documents. Although members understood that documentation is vital and necessary in their work, it is a time-consuming process for them and often makes it have a lower priority.

With the exception of the external evaluation on the pilot project implemented by the Kosovo Education Center on the use of QRP to improve preschool teachers' practice, and two evaluation studies done by the Slovenia member and the evaluation of the Step for Inclusion Project done by the member in Croatia, the other surveyed members had no information to share on how they were using monitoring and evaluation to show quality improvement by using the QRP. Members in Moldova and Armenia collected evaluations of teachers done during monitoring visits, but were not using them to systematically evaluate or document what was being done at the organizational level.

Although the Assessment Instrument has an elaborated methodology and a database that can easily assist members in processing the observation data collected during a monitoring visit, its use has been very limited, with the exception of Kosovo Education Center. More work is needed in expanding members' capacity and resources to make use of them.

Finding both tools and processes that are easy to use but also empowering and motivating are crucial to improving practice in early childhood services. They may also be one of the most important factors in professionalization, in supporting teacher autonomy, participation and recognition.

The purpose of collecting data should be to serve those who need it to change something in their practice. We see in this documentation study that when monitoring and evaluation is only done as a top-down control strategy, the results can be weaker than when practitioners can also use the data to reflect on their practice and plan for ways to reach a higher quality in that practice. The European Quality Framework on Early Childhood Education and Care (EC, 2014) strongly recommends better aligning information collected at different levels, as well as ensuring that all stakeholders, including ECEC staff be engaged and empowered during the implementation of any monitoring and evaluation processes (p. 10).

4.3.5 Expanding and supporting shared leadership

Leadership needs to be expanded both among practitioners in early childhood institutions and between practitioners and families/communities as part of the democratisation processes that best support the implementation of quality practice. However, we also need to be aware that the acquisition of the tools needed for shared leadership and collaborative management is a process and also require an investment of resources and time.

Conceiving of ECEC institutions as a forum for civil engagement that fosters social cohesion was listed in the CoRe Report (Urban et al., 2011: 40) as a key value, stating that institutions should critically reflect with and reciprocally interact about the changing needs of children, parents and the wider society. While school boards are in place for helping with decisions about school lunches, etc., it appears that their involvement in receiving information about what kinds of professional development processes their children's teachers are engaged in is very limited. While they feel that ongoing professional development is important, no parents interviewed in the case studies stated that they had been included in reflection processes around quality improvement or professional development (even in the ISSA member countries that have been the most progressive in terms of using the QRP).

> *"I know that that professional development and quality improvement are in the school plan but nothing more concrete. In board meetings, we only solve technical, safety and security issues and as parents, we cannot change this. Improving quality is a hobby of those teachers and not something that is supported and recognized. Something should be done to recognize their results and make them visible".*
>
> *(A member of Parent's Council and representative in Primary school Board in Croatia)*

Helping members of parent/community governance groups to understand what practitioners are doing in their professional development, through providing them with documentation of their work, would be a first step in inviting and including these other major stakeholders to dialogue about the work, processes and instruments/tools they are using.

"Information about teacher's professional development would mean a lot to me. Children today are different and I would believe that they (teachers) know their job."

(Parent, Croatia)

4.3.6 Advocacy

The members' responses in the survey showed that the use of the QRP is much more limited to in-service teacher training and professional development (mentoring, monitoring, working in learning communities), although they have reported being involved in advocacy activities in previous Program Reports. The Advocacy Leaflets that were specifically designed for advocacy work came later among all the resources in the QRP, but their use depended greatly on members' available resources for translating them in the local language.

In addition, reaching out to other audiences and stakeholders such as school boards, parent associations, labor unions, professional associations, donors, etc. were limited. Yet these are the groups that need to be also included in the dialogue about quality practice and how to best support its implementation (especially through professional development processes and in becoming more inclusive as institutions and as education systems). The QRP has tools that can be used as they are, or adapted to work with additional stakeholders in defining quality practice.

In addition, there is always a need for more advocacy around access to quality early childhood services, encouraging and supporting practitioners' professional development, and greater democratic and participatory approaches and processes in early childhood services. The QRP can support, at the country level, these advocacy efforts to create more competent systems, as they address various types of stakeholders.

4.4 WHY A SUPPORTIVE AND REFLECTIVE NETWORK IS A POWERFUL ONE

- Never underestimating peer learning and mutual support across countries
- Believing in deeper understanding through constant learning
- Listening to practice to influence systems
- Using the 'know-how' and 'bottom-up' within a democratic 'discourse'

4.4.1 Never underestimating peer learning and mutual support

Despite these challenges and the fact that its members are primarily small civil society organizations, membership in ISSA has shown to be an advantage in terms of giving members greater credibility within their own countries and a continuous space for expanding their expertise and finding peer support.

Being developed by an international community of experts from various organizations and implemented in so many countries, the QRP has gained not only visibility, but also value. Being a member of a supportive and reflective network has given members access to material and human resources aligned with their needs, as well as to a learning community that has enriched their individual and institutional competences through visits to other countries, joint workshops, participating in policy roundtables, and technical assistance provided by a more experienced member to another member. The QRP has been a source of material for sharing, exchanging and challenging their own experiences and most members feel owner-

ship of them. As shown earlier, ISSA has greatly supported members' implementation of the QRP in many ways, including through reliability meetings, thematic meetings, technical assistance, peer learning activities, etc. (mostly being member driven). When members of a network know that they need to become better in their work, there are higher chances that they will be successful. ISSA has provided as much support as possible.

4.4.2 Believing in deeper understanding through constant learning

ISSA's commitment to quality practice in ECD and the professional development of practitioners has remained constant since its inception. However, its understanding of the processes that best increase professionalism has changed over time. At the beginning of its journey, methods used to improve practice through professional development were more 'traditional'. Being an organization that promotes democratic principles, responsive learning, learner agency, and social construction of knowledge, ISSA realized through members' reflection that practitioners needed the same values to be realized in their professional development processes via professional learning communities. That is what most of the resources in the package enable.

As ISSA members learned how to better facilitate learning communities through different procedures and ways to increase reflection on practice, it found that participation in professional learning communities was creating stronger, more committed practitioners that had deeper understandings of quality practice. As this realisation became more pronounced, ISSA put less emphasis on using the instruments in the QRP to measure quality, and more emphasis on using them for practitioners to define quality by themselves, including family and community voices within those definitions.

The continuous commitment to nurturing the learning inside the network, to bringing new approaches for strengthening its values, and to building on the expertise and experience accumulated by members has led to both the revision of older approaches and resources, and the development of more enriched, complex and refined ones (and furthermore, to building the capacity of members inside the network to enact the new approaches and practices in many countries).

4.4.3 'Listening' to practice in order to influence systems

Strong networks need multiple ways in which members can learn from each other. ISSA currently brings together practitioners, trainers, program developers, policy makers, funders and researchers from around the world to share and reflect upon their experiences in improving quality practice during annual conferences, thematic meetings, master classes or webinars.

Being known as a network that is very much grounded in practice, ISSA's efforts have been focused to a great extent on connecting practice with research and policies, so that the changes required to build a competent system are not disconnected from practice, from what is happening in the real lives of children, families, professionals and services, but are also anchored in strong evidence claiming for adequate policies.

The development of the resources in the QRP itself has been a process informed by practice. Listening to the needs of members on what would be needed to better support changes in their systems and building on their experience from working with various stakeholders in countries, confirmed that the co-construction of knowledge, the peer learning and support among various members and types of professionals have a high chance of succeeding in bringing about meaningful and responsive changes. Each new resource added to the QRP has been a result of listening, learning and co-creating.

"The most important thing was that we were working together at the network level in a group to prepare the QRP. The international experiences that had been shared among the members of that group brought perspectives and deep insight on the process dimensions of education and a very good learning opportunity for all involved. For the Open Academy Step by Step staff, this involvement has also been an opportunity to include their experiences and resource – such as the book on professional learning communities – in the QRP."

(Sanja Brajkovic, Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia)

What has ISSA learned from its members about what is still needed to continue strengthening the QRP as an enabling package for quality improvement processes? Some suggestions refer to very specific aspects like: how to help practitioners engage in peer observations or how to promote shared leadership and collaborative management. But they also refer to the development of tools that document improvements at the institutional level.

4.4.4 Using the 'know-how' and the 'bottom-up' approach within a democratic 'discourse'

The resources in the QRP range from a policy document, a handy guidebook and tools for practitioners, to handbooks and tools for in-service training providers and advocacy tools targeting parents, educators and policy makers. This diversity of resources indicates ISSA's sustained concern for translating theory and policy into practice, believing that many good policies and theories lack enabling mechanisms, strategies and tools for implementation, especially in the case of *process quality*.

In order for changes to occur in practice, besides having a well-articulated policy and committed and sustained competent leadership, a key point relies in each practitioner being an actor of change. They are the ones impacting the daily lives of children and families and they are the ones who are eventually making a very big difference for each child and family. Working directly with practitioners to become agents of change requires time, but above all efficient empowering strategies to determine a long-term and sustained change.

ISSA's 'know-how' is grounded in sound theory, but it is built through years of experience of working with practitioners and other professionals at different levels, listening, observing them, and learning from them and of finding the right channels to translate practice into policies, and research into policies informed by practice. Practice is essential, it tells the 'true story', the place from where we start to think about change.

That is why bottom-up approaches are so valuable. They can continuously nurture systems with refreshing innovations that are driven by practitioners as agents of change and grounded in the heard voices of children and families, thus easier penetrating systems. They are powerful in terms of scope and impact when they operate in contexts that allow space for dialogue, for participation, for confronting views and ideas, for open peer learning, constant listening, observing and reflecting. The very dynamic and, sometimes to a great extent, unpredictable environment in which early childhood professionals operate, requires strong professional values, but versatile and critical thinking around everyday practice, where children and parents are the most reliable partners.

To model bottom-up approaches within a democratic discourse so that professionals in countries may benefit, does not mean to *talk about them* within ISSA's learning community, but to *use them* when working within such a diverse ISSA community. In this way, members become multipliers of empowerment, of innovative thinking, of critical dialogue and peer support when working with professionals in their own countries.

4.5 POTENTIAL USE OF QRP IN NEW CONTEXTS – CONDITIONS FOR POSITIVE RESULTS

There are no magic quality frameworks and resource packages that alone will create long-lasting results in improving process quality in early childhood systems. Strong values, timely and tailored to context approaches, supportive conditions and mechanisms, and competent stakeholders who are enabled and motivated can considerably increase the chances for sustained changes.

This documentation study presents in a reflective manner the work done by ISSA as a network and its members on quality improvement over a sustained period of time, building on the sound legacy of the child-centered and democratic value-oriented Step by Step Programme. The findings have led to sharing the lessons learned from ISSA members while working with the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy and the QRP in their different country contexts. At the same time, these lessons constitute a valid guiding foundation for the potential use of these resources in other countries, by other organizations committed to process quality improvement in preschool and primary school settings. The key conditions can be summarized as follows.

- Having an **in-depth knowledge and understanding** of child-centered approaches represent a basic prerequisite for using the Quality Principles and the QRP. The concepts and views used and unpacked in the resources rely on pedagogical theories that celebrate the child's uniqueness, voice, competence, agency and potential, as well as theories that reflect democratic approaches in education – teacher's agency and autonomy, family and community involvement and participation, respect for diversity and inclusion.

- Given their versatile nature, the appropriate use of the resources is heavily dependent on having an extended experience in **implementing child-centered programmes and democratic values and practice when working with children, families and communities**. A deep understanding of the quality principles and the quality indicators requires a strong connection between theory and practice and the capacity to translate child-centered theory into practice. All seven Focus Areas of the Quality Principles are equally important and interdependent and all require both theoretical and practical knowledge and experience to illustrate them and expand their meaning.

- Changing the quality of everyday practice takes time and requires a **strategic approach/plan, financial resources and the right capacity to use the resources effectively.** It requires (at the minimum) a team of expert trainers and a pool of competent mentors/coaches/professional development facilitators and reliability coordinators to ensure the appropriate use of certain tools. The process of changing mindsets, understandings, views and practices among practitioners, managers, families, and other stakeholders in the different levels of the system takes time and requires constant and competent accompaniment. Embarking on such a process requires significant commitment and investment, starting from the beginning until the changes become naturally sustained through an internalized culture of quality at the level of the individual, team and institution.

- The Principles of Quality Pedagogy rely on **democratic values,** such as participation in decision making, freedom for expression, diversity and respect for the other, and shared responsibility. All of the resources in the QRP reflect and are built upon the **same values and practices when working with children, practitioners, families, communities and other stakeholders.** The process of improving quality is more powerful and sustainable when enacted through democratic practices; therefore the QRP works better in such enabling contexts.

- While promoting universal values through a collective effort to define quality pedagogy, **the Quality Principles and the QRP allow and require adaptation to each country's context** where they are implemented without compromising the core values of the approach to quality. A child-centered approach can operate differently in different countries. Being loyal to the child's agency and providing them with the optimal conditions to develop holistically and express their potential can take varied shapes depending on cultural factors.

FINAL REMARKS

The main findings and many reflections regarding ISSA's work on quality improvement by utilizing the ISSA's *Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and the *Quality Resource Pack* have been shared in the last two chapters. A few more remarks in the end.

ISSA's entire work on quality improvement has relied heavily on the belief and claim that *process quality* is pivotal in bringing better outcomes for children in terms of their overall well-being, development and learning. The values, knowledge and practice that professionals employ in their everyday work can shape the quality of all interactions among adults and children and among children, the quality of the environment in which children develop, and the quality of the play and learning experiences in which they are engaged. For this reason, much of the work done by ISSA through its members has been focusing on nurturing the professionalism in both practitioners and those who work with practitioners, so that quality is a constant concern and is supported through cooperative, reflexive and inclusive cultures within the early childhood services.

However, we have realized that while empowering and equipping practitioners with competences that enable them to grow and improve professionally are foundational conditions for continuous improvement of their practices, much relies on the contexts in which they are operating too. The quality of management and leadership, the opportunities for peer learning and group reflection, the opportunities for cooperation beyond the territory of a classroom or a setting/institution, the culture of and mechanisms for bridging practice with research and policy, all play a crucial role in enabling quality to thrive and to stay at the heart of working with children and their families.

Much is left to be done. Quality is a concept that is continuously evolving, a place where practice, research and policy meet and inform each other. It is continuously exposed to re-definitions and attunements to new understandings about children, families, professionals, services, communities as times are changing and becoming increasingly complex and challenging. The work is never finished.

While being proud of how much has been achieved in the past 20 years, and especially in the past six years, by ISSA members in their countries particularly in terms of improving quality on the level of individual practice and (inter)institutional networking, with some exceptional achievements on the national policy level, we know that the systemic approach to quality requires a long-term commitment and sustained efforts to create long-lasting changes. And that asks not only for high expertise and sound experience from the 'facilitators' of change, but also financial resources, governmental support and strong local partnerships to create the appropriate conditions for changes to happen.

As with this study, ISSA as a network of expert organizations remains committed to sharing its experiences and to continuing its work on quality improvement by staying alert in creating timely resources that can inspire and empower its members and other early childhood organization to embrace a systemic approach to quality.

Peer learning and support among ISSA members across the borders of their countries, sharing their experiences from diverse contexts, confronting their understandings, and co-participating in the development of international policy documents and tools that are grounded in practice and informed by research, contributes greatly to the spiral of learning around how to better nurture and sustain quality in early years' services. Equally important, it contributes to the dominant discourse about professionalism in early years, empowering actors to dialogue about quality, to build together a shared understanding of quality, thus finding synergies in their actions. In this way, we have better chances that quality is seen in its complexity and is highly valued for what it can bring to children, to families and to those who are working in services.

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