

**Guidance on the
Importance of
Quality in Early
Childhood Learning
and Education in
Latin America and
the Caribbean**

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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Acronyms

ASQ: Ages and Stages Questionnaire

CIS: Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale

CLASS: Classroom Assessment Scoring System

CONAFE: National Council for Educational Promotion (Mexico) (*Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo in its Spanish acronym*)

ECC: Early Childhood Commission (Jamaica)

ECE: Early childhood learning and education

ECEC: Early Childhood Education and Care

ECERS-R: Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale - Revised

EFA: Education for All

EPRP: Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GPE: Global Partnership for Education

ICBF: Colombian Family Welfare Institute (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar in its Spanish acronym*)

IDELA: International Development & Early Learning Assessment

ITERS: Infant and Toddler Environmental Rating Scale

LAC: Latin America and the Caribbean

MELQO: Measure for Early Learning Quality Outcomes

MICS: Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys

MITRCC: Missouri Infant Toddler Responsive Caregiving Checklist

NGO: Non Governmental Organization

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

ORCE: Observational Record of the Caregiving Environment

PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment

PRIDI: Regional Project on Child Development Indicators

RINJU: Play Corner (Chile) (*Rincón de Juego in its Spanish acronym*)

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal

TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

1. Quality of and Access to ECE as Functions of Equity and Sustainability

Early childhood learning and education (ECE) is an important piece of the composite of early childhood development services supporting a social ecology of ‘nurturing care’, which also includes adequate health, nutrition, early stimulation through responsive caregiving and protection, safety, and security.¹

ECE services, including childcare, preschool, pre-primary programs, and the early grades of primary school, generally address the age range of 3 to 8 in a child’s life (although increasingly include care for younger children). They support teachers and caregivers to create safe, stimulating, and nurturing learning environments while also supporting parents to participate in their young children’s growth, development, and learning.²

Research indicates that access to integrated early childhood development services, such as ECE programs, can help reduce the major inequities, cycles of poverty, and lack of basic human rights faced by a vast majority of the world’s children aged zero to five.^{3 4 5} This may hold especially true for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), where 3.6 million three- and four-year-olds demonstrate inadequate cognitive, physical, and emotional development for their age, and rates of inequality are more concentrated than in any other region of the world.^{6 7} Centre-, school- and group home-based ECE programs (on which this report focuses), along with family engagement groups and home-visiting programs, present an excellent opportunity to ameliorate and strengthen every child’s optimal development and growth. Moreover, attending ECE has been shown to improve children’s on-time entry and overall performance in primary school, as well as future health, well-being, civic engagement, and financial stability in adult life.^{8 9 10 11}

Uptake of ECE, along with related policy innovation and public attention, has increased around the globe, spurred on by advancements in neuroscience and our understanding of brain development in the earliest years of life,^{12 13} as well as by economic research demonstrating its high rate of societal return on investments.^{14 15} ECE has progressively gained an influential position in the public agenda -- from the Education for All (EFA) Framework of Action at the Dakar Conference in 2000 in which the expansion and improvement of ECE became a central objective, to the United Nations’ post-2015 SDG 4.2 calling for all children to have access to high quality pre-primary education to the EFA in Latin America and the Caribbean Lima Declaration of 2014 ensuring an inclusive and equitable access to quality learning for all. This increased prominence has resulted in a heavy focus on increasing access to ECE programs.¹⁶ Preschool enrolment rates increased globally from 33% in 1999 to 54% in 2012, with particularly high rates in many LAC countries.¹⁷ Across the LAC region, enrolment in ECE has increased substantially since 2000, including among children under 3 years of age.¹⁸

Despite overall LAC regional success, the issue of universalizing access must remain on the ECE policy agenda, not only because some countries of the region still lag behind in terms of minimal rates of provision, but also because there remain significant disparities in access to key services, favoring higher income and urban populations and children without developmental delays or disabilities.¹⁹ For example, only half of young children in Guatemala attend ECE, with the vast majority being from wealthy families.²⁰ Access to ECE programs as an issue of equity has been demonstrated by disparities reported across the LAC region and the globe (notable exceptions include Uruguay and Jamaica, which both offer



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nearly universal provision of ECE with only minimal socioeconomic disparities). Consistently, children from poorer families; from rural areas; from cultural-linguistic minority or marginalized backgrounds; with exposure to or displaced by conflict, disease, or disaster; and children with disabilities or developmental delays have less access to ECE and other early childhood development services,²¹ although research indicates that they stand to benefit more than their less vulnerable counterparts.²² Quality of ECE services and systems as an issue of equity, however, has received less global and regional attention, perhaps because improving access rates to ECE by increasing infrastructure may be more straightforward than improving the quality of existing programs and ensuring the quality of future programs.

The benefits of ECE on children's development vary according to the quality of the program, with stronger positive effects among high-quality programs and deleterious effects from poor-quality programs.^{23 24} While much of the research base hails from the global

north, there exists an expanding body of research verifying the effect in the LAC region. For example, an impact study conducted in Brazil demonstrated that children who attend high-quality ECE programs (as measured by a slight adaptation of the ECERS-R, discussed in Chapter 4 of this report) were more likely to achieve higher scores on the Provinha second-grade literacy test scores. It is worth noting that this study also found that the average quality rating for five of the seven cities studied was "inadequate," and the average for the other two cities was "basic,"²⁵ which demonstrates the urgency of the matter.

Thus, the shift in conversation around ECE from "Why?" to "How?" is timely. It is necessary to expand children's opportunities for participation in ECE as well as to improve and maintain the quality of their ECE experiences. Effective ECE policy sustainably optimizes both the quality of services as well as their equitable distribution.²⁶ Achievement of SDG 4.2 requires a national, regional and global commitment to equitable provision of ECE, in terms of both access and quality of services, to all children.

2. Significance and Impact of Quality

High-quality ECE programs support and cultivate positive family well-being and allow children to attain their fullest potential as individuals and as participating citizens.²⁷ Moreover, these programs offer a potential opportunity to mitigate the deeply-entrench effects of discrimination, sexism, violence, and child abuse, among others. At the 2017 Regional Meeting of Education Ministers of LAC held in Buenos Aires by UNESCO and others, a regional commitment was established to continue expanding quality ECE programs, particularly for marginalized and/or excluded children, “through quality solutions that promote the comprehensive development of children and active participation of families and communities, engaging interinstitutional and intersectoral partnerships” (p.10).²⁸

High quality is a necessary condition for attaining a positive impact in ECE programs.²⁹ As such, provision of ECE programs, alone, does not necessarily lead to the best possible results -- underfunded, low-quality programs cannot and do not accomplish what higher-quality programs do in terms of children’s development and learning. According to a study released by the Inter-American Development Bank in 2015, *The Early Years: Child Well-Being and the Role of Public Policy*, many programs in the LAC region are underfunded and fail to focus on quality. Both access and quality are inequitably distributed across the region, disproportionately favoring wealthier, urban families.^{30 31 32 33} Overall, ECE funding for children between 0 and 5 years old is three times less than the funding dedicated to primary school-aged children. As a percentage of GDP, Latin America and the Caribbean spends around half of the OECD average (0.7% of GDP, ranging widely from 0.5% in Turkey and the United States to 1.8% in Iceland).³⁴

Meanwhile, many countries have failed to develop and implement a consistent method of measuring and monitoring the quality of ECE programs. Although preschools are generally incorporated into the educational sector, approximately one-

third of children who attend preschool are enrolled in private institutions, often operating outside the regulatory system.³⁵ Without proper monitoring of basic requirements for operation and of licensure processes, private ECE programs -- while bolstering rates of ECE coverage -- can pose a serious threat to quality. Argentina presents a prime example of the concern over equitable quality of ECE programs amidst the universalizing of access: as in Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic, the starting age of compulsory education was lowered to 5 in 2006 and then (as in Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, and Uruguay) to 4 in 2014.³⁶ This resulted in a 31% increase in ECE enrolment between 2000 and 2015. In 2010 the access rate was 96.3% for 5-year-olds and 81.5% for 4-year-olds,³⁷ with nearly a third of those services covered by private ECE programs.³⁸ Despite high rates of participation, provision of ECE services has remained deeply fragmented between public, private, and non-governmental governance, with no consistent quality assurance mechanisms, thus leading to an unequal and inequitable distribution of quality programs. In short, children from low-income families are more likely to attend low-quality ECE programs.^{39 40 41}

It is essential to note that there is an ongoing discussion amongst the international research community regarding the difficulty of establishing a cross-cultural definition of quality in ECE to be utilized and measured across contexts, particularly in specific detail. In his 2006 background paper on ECE quality for the EFA Global Monitoring Report, Robert Myers, drawing on a theoretical discussion of *coherence versus diversity* by Peter Moss, presented a cogent, cautionary argument against a narrow, “industrial-age” perspective on quality. This conceptualization of quality wrongly claims to be “inherent, objective, absolute and able to be discovered by applying logic (or through research)...tidy, coherent and predictable...;” thereby negating “multiple and changing truths, diversity, subjectivity and experience and uncertainty in a changing, messy

and unpredictable world” (p.9).⁴² However, the response to the discussion cannot be sheer relativistic disabling, which could potentially put children who are already vulnerable at further risk of harmful ECE programs, but rather a context-specific definitional process engaging concepts of why and how quality is to be conceptualized, measured, and improved. As Yoshikawa and Kabay elaborate in their background paper for the 2015 EFA Global Monitoring Report, there remains an immense need for the science and evidence base of early childhood development to incorporate a better understanding of culturally-based norms and practices in families and communities.⁴³

In order to address the issue of quality across the LAC region, this report operationalizes the Conceptual Framework developed by UNICEF to support national ECE expansion and strengthening to integral, well-functioning scale.⁴⁴ Within this framework, the following sub-sector elements contribute to effective and equitable high-quality early childhood education systems, policies, and programs: 1) planning and resource allocation, 2) curriculum and pedagogical

approach, 3) workforce, 4) family and community engagement, and 5) quality assurance mechanisms (see Figure 1). Below is an elaboration of the many ways in which these components intersect. The guiding principles of the Conceptual Framework, intended to influence discussion of the components, are equity, efficiency, responsiveness, collaboration, and coordination. The Conceptual Framework should be utilized as such, a frame of reference to stimulate intentional dialogue and be adapted accordingly: each country context must undergo its own dynamic and participatory process -- involving parents, teachers, researchers, funders and decision-makers at national and local levels -- to negotiate a contextualized definition of quality as it relates to each of the components of ECE. Essential to this process of defining and committing to quality in ECE is the engagement of policymakers and representatives from the wide variety of sectors that influence and are impacted by early childhood development, including health, urban planning, social protection, emergency response, labour and cultural development, in order to support early learning for all families with young children.



Figure 1: UNICEF Conceptual Framework for Pre-Primary Education

Source: UNICEF, Conceptual Framework on Building a Strong Pre-Primary Sub-Sector (in development), 2018

Planning and Resource Allocation

Strategic planning and policy formulation -- and the allocation of the human, physical, and financial resources necessary to enable and implement them -- are crucial for driving quality improvement in ECE.⁴⁵ Furthermore, we know that policy and programming designed to optimize integration and coordination across early childhood development services and related social sectors, called “convergence of interventions” or “multi-sectoral interventions”, is more effective than compartmentalized policies and programs.⁴⁶ According to Vegas and Santibáñez (2010), a “coherent, well-defined, long-term national policy can facilitate the sustainability of existing programs, especially if it is developed through a consensus-oriented process” (p.113).⁴⁷ Vertical coordination and communication across levels of governance within the ECE system, from program-specific context to local to sub-national to national, and in collaboration with academic, NGO, other civil society, and private sectors, further contribute to strengthening systems to enable quality ECE programs. Establishing policy directives and clear governance structures, roles, and responsibilities facilitates the identification of gaps and potentially beneficial adjustments to planning efforts. Vertical alignment of planning and resource allocation is also necessary across education and age levels, such that opportunities to learn and grow are coherent from birth and throughout a child’s educational trajectory.⁴⁸

Ministries of finance have a particularly critical role in national ECE policy decision-making, as well as in improving and expanding local governance and control in budgeting and decision-making. The amount of public expenditure on ECE can be discussed in terms of percentage of GDP (which the OECD study, *Starting Strong II*, suggests should be a minimum of 1%)⁴⁹ or in terms of annual spending

per capita (i.e., per child), but the meaning of these numbers shifts according to several variables, including total GDP and currency spending power. Regardless, Article 4 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges countries to provide resources to their “maximum” capacity and to monitor those resources to ensure compliance.⁵⁰ The converse, i.e., a lack of proper investment in early childhood, inhibits the potential development of children and reinforces deprivations, inequities, and intergenerational poverty.⁵¹ Finance ministries enable ECE quality not only by ensuring an adequate amount of funding to cover both capital and recurrent costs but also by developing well-informed and strategic innovations in the allocation of funds that support all elements of the sector (including all components of the Conceptual Framework herein operationalized) and their sustainable improvement. One such innovation is the dynamic budgeting model utilized in Peru, which combines historical budgeting, needs based budgeting, and results based budgeting, where budget allocations are linked to specific population based targets.⁵² While the researchers reported the need for further emphasis on consistent implementation, it is nevertheless one of the few countries where the Ministry of Economy has an open database on financial transparency.

Meanwhile, part of what makes quality assurance and improvement so much more nuanced than the expansion of access to ECE programs are the budgeting trade-offs that must be considered by national and program level decision-makers between salaries, class sizes, the provision of materials, the training and supervision of teachers, family engagement initiatives, and other allocations. Decision-makers require capacity building, disaggregated statistical information from data

systems, and full exposure to recent research evidence to plan and budget effectively. Guidance is especially needed at the local governance level in highly decentralized contexts.⁵³ For example, an important issue faced in ECE is that of universal versus targeted policies. LAC countries tend towards the latter, allocating limited resources to the most vulnerable children. Yet an unintended consequence of this targeted approach can be the increase of social segregation due to the concentration of poor or marginalized children within targeted centres, many of which are characterized by lower quality. Another unintended consequence, which is seen in the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (*“Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar”*, ICBF) programs in Colombia, for example, is that children whose socioeconomic condition is barely beyond the level of vulnerability of the targeted provision, are denied access to affordable ECE. Without the full gamut of information, policymakers could unintentionally exacerbate inequities.⁵⁴

An ample amount of information is required to make informed decisions related to planning and allocation -- from the definition of quality standards to an elaboration of aligned monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and quality improvement supports. The limited published data and statistics currently available in most LAC regional contexts, much less well-developed data and information systems, presents a severe limitation in stakeholders' capacity to improve the conditions of quality in ECE. Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, for example, lack sufficient basic data on early childhood development to effectively discuss or analyse the situation, likely hiding some of the direst ECD statistics in the region, especially in light of recent political instability in these countries. For this reason, ECE must be included in an Emergency Preparedness

and Response Plan (EPRP) with a designated, on-deck ECE expert team and explicit policy protocols to delineate supports for children who have been displaced or have been affected by other emergency situations (conflict, violence, climate change, economic and political instability, disease, and disaster).

In the cases where data is in fact collected in the LAC region, it is often done so by multiple ministries and/or at various levels of governance. It is therefore important that this information is consolidated and shared to optimize integrated early childhood development efforts. Data that is disaggregated by socioeconomic status, location, ethnicity, home language, gender, or disability furthermore ensures equitable access to high-quality programs and ensures that all children's needs are met. The available evidence demonstrates that the more economically and socially disadvantaged a child is, the more they stand to benefit from ECE, and the greater the return on investments.⁵⁵ One approach to understanding how ECE programs' quality and their impact are related to demographic differences and inequities (e.g., socioeconomic status, indigeneity, rurality vs. urbanicity) could be to track each child with a personal identification number that reflects the child's demographic information. This and other approaches to disaggregated data analysis require sophisticated data collection and storage processes and present potential concerns for privacy.

As Robert Myers succinctly demonstrated in his report, quality is an issue of equity, but equity is also an issue of quality.⁵⁶ Thus, effective, high-quality ECE systems, policies, and programs entail an equitable distribution of available resources, equitable access to services, and equitable distribution and remuneration of human capital.⁵⁷

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 2010 Moscow Declaration, and the 2014 Lima Declaration of Education for All underscore the importance of ensuring quality through holistic pedagogies that are responsive to the needs of children and that value creativity, cooperation, self-confidence, autonomy, active learning, and the well-being of children.⁵⁸ Yet, worldwide and across the Latin America and Caribbean region, there is an unfortunate trend of academic pushdown of early literacy and numeracy connected to some extent with the increased use of learning measurements and standardized tests, often promoted by international agencies.⁵⁹ Also problematic is the fact that many countries fail to implement a wide-reaching system for child developmental screening or professional supports for curricular and pedagogical modification, despite evidence that early intervention for children with disabilities or developmental delays is critical.⁶⁰

Employing Peter Moss' aforementioned theoretical comparison, countries must balance coherence and accountability with diversity and responsiveness in the development of curricula and pedagogical approaches. A national or regional curricular framework, intentionally designed to be flexible and adapted for responsiveness, will only prove effective if widely disseminated, implemented, and supported with equitable professional development opportunities. Equally essential is the capacity building to support ECE programs and teachers in understanding the pedagogical aims of the curricular framework as well as opportunities for context-responsive adaptation. Mechanisms that enable those who regularly put the curriculum into action to provide feedback and recommendations to improve the framework are integral to connecting wide-scale policies to the everyday ECE program experience and can help assure relevance. Other considerations of pedagogical quality include program intensity and duration, family involvement, language of instruction, a daily routine that includes ample opportunities for play as well as positive and meaningful interactions, and health and nutrition services and supports.

Vertical alignment from the home to ECE programs to primary schools promotes smooth transitions and “facilitates a coordinated, sequential strategy for promoting early learning, which provides support for children across the life course”.⁶¹ This relates to the joint coordination of system planning and resource allocation discussed above. It is important that ECE is recognized as a valuable opportunity for learning in its own right rather than mere preparation for learning in later schooling. Maria Victoria Peralta, based in part on her analysis of ECE curricula in Latin America, has proposed the following principles as essential to any curricular framework: an active child, an integral view of development, participation, pertinence, cultural relevance, and flexibility.⁶² Sharon Lynn Kagan, another prominent scholar in ECE, describes high-quality curricula as holistic, child-centred, and rich with opportunities for play.⁶³ How diverse contexts define and elaborate pedagogical guidelines according to their conceptualization of “holistic” will vary, but as a baseline, academic push-down of literacy and numeracy that is suitable for primary schooling should be avoided. It is also recommended that overly-complex, inflexible, rigid, scripted, or didactic curricula be avoided. According to a recent, pivotal report by the LEGO Foundation in coordination with UNICEF, a distinctive element of quality ECE programming for young children is ‘learning through play’, or ‘playful learning’. Play that is meaningful, joyful, engaging, imaginative, and promotes communication and collaboration amongst children promotes development and builds critical knowledge, skills, curiosity, and creativity. Learning through play should occur not only in pre-primary settings but also in the lower grades of primary school as well as in the home and the surrounding community with children’s parents or primary caregivers. Therefore, it creates a thread of continuity and connectivity across the various spheres of a child’s life. Given the value of play for children’s development, it is critical that policies, planning, and capacity-building of teachers, administrators, and parents are galvanized and streamlined to support integrated playful learning.^{64 65}

Finally, given what research indicates about the importance of children's social interactions within their social context and how that influences their developmental and learning trajectories,^{66 67} ECE curricula and pedagogy should support and create various opportunities for sustained positive interactions between teachers and children as well as amongst children in culturally-relevant ways. Many Latin American and Caribbean cultures support learning through "intent participation" or "active observation" rather than "assembly-line instruction" or academic lesson transmission; therefore, a social constructivist approach involving intent participation in more informal settings may be more suitable for ECE programs in the LAC region.⁶⁸ Likewise, opportunities for learning through play must be culturally and linguistically relevant and responsive.

Much like in the process of defining quality, countries must undergo a collective and context-responsive negotiation to establish pedagogical standards or goals for age-appropriate learning related to a context-based understanding of childhood and education.⁶⁹ Regardless of how a country context may determine these, it is important for ECE teachers to know what is expected of them and the young children with whom they interact. Thus, the development of a curricular framework or pedagogical guidelines is related to teachers' professionalization through pre-service and in-service training. ECE teachers who are confident in their pedagogical and curricular decisions are more likely to cultivate positive interactions and a warm climate.



Workforce

The quality of ECE programs depends significantly on the daily pedagogical and relational experiences that teachers and other staff provide to young children. Research substantiating the association between teacher qualifications and ECE quality, including improved cognitive and social development outcomes, demonstrates the need for strengthening the supply and quality of the workforce.^{70 71} In a literature review published by the OECD in 2012 of research regarding quality of ECE programs, there was strong evidence associating teacher pre-service qualifications and ongoing professional development opportunities with impactful measures of process quality, or positive program climate and teacher-child interactions.⁷² In short, well-prepared teachers implement high-quality ECE, whether in centre-based or home-based settings.⁷³

Yet, the care and attention of children in ECE programs across the LAC region often take place in situations of short-handed staff who are poorly paid and have little training. Certainly, the low salary of most ECE teachers globally has resulted in low professional status and little recognition, all of which contribute to the high-turnover rates amongst teachers. This turnover can be detrimental to children's development and waste resources spent on professional development. Investment is necessary to ensure attractive compensation and ongoing training and coaching programs that allow for the hiring and retention of a skilled workforce in this sector. Generally, educators working with older children are better trained and paid, leading to continuous and unsurprising professional flight and draining of workforce talent. Early childhood educators' salaries cannot be less than those received by their peers working at other education levels. Moreover, an unfortunately resilient feature of the ECE professional landscape and the limitation of its expansion in LAC countries is the feminization of the profession and the stigmatization of male staff.

Finally, because ECE is an affect-dependent profession, positive organizational climate, staff working conditions, and overall professional well-being contribute to teacher retention and effectiveness. Some factors that improve working conditions for teachers overlap with the conditions that improve the experience of children. As a concrete example, the structural quality element of low child-teacher ratios reduces stress for teachers, improves teacher-child interactions, and thereby indirectly improves child development and learning outcomes. A positive organizational climate for teachers may also include elements of greater autonomy and support for showing leadership or opportunities for participating in decision-making in aspects of the curriculum, for example.⁷⁴

In order to implement high-quality pedagogical strategies and practices, teachers and teaching assistants require quality training in ECE. Many LAC countries face drastic variability in qualification and professional preparation of ECE personnel, with a particular lack of required professional competencies. Quality teacher preparation and ongoing professional development should be well-organized, relevant for national and local contexts, financially and geographically accessible, and aligned between theory, current research, prescribed requirements (e.g., learning standards, assessment), and practice. A fundamental action is to strengthen public policies aimed at valuing educators in the field of early childhood and addressing their initial and continuing education in the specificities of the field of ECE. Improvement of pre-service qualifications in ECE and, simultaneously, improvement of ongoing professional development for active teachers require a context-specific plan of action and concomitant investment of resources. Teachers' capacities and teaching practices reflect the content of their professional training and development, whether pre-service (at the university level or the trade license/

certificate level) or in-service. Professional training must provide ECE teachers with specific capacities, such as knowledge of human development and strategies for working with diverse children and children with disabilities or developmental delays. This underscores the critical role of academia in supporting and building ECE workforce capacity: across the region, there is an urgent need to evaluate and update curricula and pedagogy -- both for children and for training teachers -- according to new evidence regarding teaching and learning. Higher education and research institutions are a valuable asset in developing programs and specific strategies for teacher training and coaching.

Research shows an association between positive teacher-child interactions and both higher pre-service qualifications and in-service professional development. Only the latter, however, was associated with an increase in children's cognitive, behavioural, executive function, and social-emotional outcomes.^{75 76} Additionally, recent research indicates that professional development in the form of relational, on-site, and on-going coaching or mentoring is particularly effective.⁷⁷ These on-site coaches, if properly trained, can simultaneously employ observation-based quality evaluation of teachers' practices to contribute toward a composite understanding of national, regional, and local professional development needs.

According to a recent study of ECE in the LAC region, "the level of certification of educators in the different countries under study is unequally distributed, depending on the geographical region where they work, the age, and the different professional skills presented" (p.11)⁷⁸ An ECE workforce with highly disparate qualifications, skills, and knowledge prevents equitable service provision. In line with the vision of attaining equity of quality for children and equity for the ECE workforce, countries must provide, at the least, equal access to continuous, high-quality professional support for all personnel, including in very remote areas. It is likely that increased, targeted workforce development for those teaching in the most challenging circumstances would prove even more effective.

ECE programs and policies must support the hiring of qualified teachers with knowledge of the local context and the required training to work with specific populations (ethnolinguistic minority or indigenous populations, or children with disabilities). Studies show that children in ECE programs with a higher proportion of non-dominant cultures or home languages (usually reflecting a lack of cultural or linguistic "match" between teacher and child) experience lower-quality interactions with their teachers.⁷⁹ For this reason, in countries like Colombia, indigenous and Afro-descent populations may prefer to hire members of their communities.⁸⁰ In many LAC countries, however, there aren't sufficient ECE teachers willing to live in remote areas or capable of teaching in indigenous languages or equipped with suitable cultural knowledge.

One strategy might be to create incentive systems to train and attract highly qualified and contextually appropriate teachers for the most vulnerable (rural or poor) areas, which is related to the first component of planning and human resource allocation. Chile, for example, has developed salary incentives for teachers working in remote areas and in schools with a large number of children living in poverty or considered at-risk.⁸¹ Research indicates that the skills and abilities of children largely develop through educational interactions with teachers, especially if they are of quality. It is therefore recommended that the LAC region invest in ECE teachers' professional expertise, specifically promoting cultural- and linguistic-responsiveness of teachers and teaching assistants.

Recruiting and retaining a qualified workforce may require such professionalization strategies as developing gradated job profiles and associated qualifications, with clear and supported paths for professional advancement and growth. In parallel with teachers and teacher assistants, requirements for minimum qualifications of program administrators, professional development coaches, and other leadership roles, as well as investment and planning with regards to capacity building, can improve workforce quality.

Family and Community Engagement

While trained, committed teachers are at the heart of quality ECE, powerful early learning also happens in the home environment.^{82 83} For this reason, a growing body of research demonstrates that high-quality ECE programs and systems must strategize effectively in order to engage families and communities and strengthen child-focused partnerships.^{84 85 86 87} More involved parenting -- active facilitation of nurturing, responsive, and stimulating interactions and early experiences through the provision of nurturing care, which ensures health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, social-emotional well-being, and early learning -- is associated with children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as their motivation to learn.^{88 89}

Family engagement on the part of various ECE stakeholders and actors truly begins -- or fails to -- before birth. Specific family engagement strategies might include providing guidance and disseminating basic child development and neuroscience evidence; child-focused, bi- or multi-directional collaborative communication; parenting education to support all families in establishing positive home environments that stimulate children's development, including how to sensitively and actively participate in their child's stimulation through play, storytelling, singing, reading, and other experiences; parental participation and inclusion in decision-making or volunteering with the ECE program through parent councils and parent-staff organizations. These strategies must be context- and culturally-responsive, and therefore will likely differ across country contexts or even from program to program. Because families are diverse and have varying needs, high-quality programs must employ strategic, differentiated engagement with each family. Moreover, it is critical that participation involves a strengths-based approach, supports families with sensitivity to their circumstances, and empowers them to build on their positive practices.⁹⁰ Given that only one in six children 3-4 years old engages with their father in early learning activities, there is a

particularly acute need to strategically engage fathers in the LAC region.⁹¹ Research findings indicate that effective family engagement improves the confidence of parents, fosters positive and responsive familial interactions between parents, and improves family well-being and financial stability.⁹² ECE programs and other early childhood development services should provide families with supportive, nonviolent alternatives to corporal punishment and other harsh disciplines, shown to have long-term adverse effects on children's development and well-being.⁹³

As such, it is important for ECE program staff to collect information regarding families' beliefs and socio-cultural practices, attitudes about childhood and education, home language, financial and health (including mental health) circumstances, and the need for continuity of comprehensive, wraparound services, such as early morning care or health and nutrition services. This information proves useful in programmatic and pedagogical decision-making, as well as in guiding, at regional and local levels, ways for increasing demand amongst families for ECE services. A critical potential point of early contact may be through hospitals and the health system, as is the case in Jamaica, where information is collected, and parent education is provided. Indeed, of particular importance in the LAC region is the increased effort to enhance parental education with regards to the benefits of ECE. Results of a multi-country evaluation indicated that in Chile, for example, some families required increased persuasion to be convinced of the importance of ECE. Therefore, the government of Chile initiated a series of media campaigns stressing the relationship between early development stimulation and improved achievement in further schooling.⁹⁴ This accentuates a further point: community engagement encompasses not only community organizations but also media and broadcasting. Strategic engagement of all varieties should be considered.

When ECE programs and families exchange information regularly and adopt consistent approaches to socialization, daily routines, child development, and learning, children experience better continuity and consistency across programmatic and home environments.⁹⁵ From a social-ecological perspective, this knowledge sharing supports effective transitions and increased cohesiveness within and between the people and settings that surround young children and plays an essential role in their development. It is essential that when collecting family information or distributing information with regards to ECE or early childhood development, that ECE programs concertedly employ culturally-appropriate communications in the families' home language.

Especially when coupled with family engagement, community engagement -- or the connections established amongst ECE programs and systems and

related community services -- facilitates effective and efficient ECE programs and systems and contributes to the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of young children. Specific community engagement strategies include holding events within the ECE setting that are open to the community; inviting community leaders or experts into the school setting or accompanying the children out into the community to learn from and share with its members. Collaboration with community resources and services is essential in strengthening programs and cross-sectoral system coordination.⁹⁶ High-quality ECE cultivates widespread community support and buy-in of ECE, particularly if families and communities are empowered to contribute to the design and implementation of programs and to the development of quality standards that reflect their sociocultural values.



Quality Assurance and Improvement Mechanisms

Quality measurement and monitoring can identify critical areas of improvement and resource needs, as well as inform key policy decisions (including licensing, budget, staffing, and regulations) related to the first component of an effective ECE sector discussed above, i.e., planning and allocation. Conducting data-driven analysis -- including both quantitative and qualitative data -- is essential for the optimal planning and delivery of high-quality programs and is necessary for assuring the rights of each child to quality ECE. This is confirmed by evidence of positive associations between the implementation of quality monitoring and improvement systems with high-quality teacher-child interactions.⁹⁷ Effective monitoring of ECE service quality and regulatory compliance across providers is critically important for the equity and sustainability of programs. Without coherent and comprehensive quality data collection, it is difficult to know what is going on across and within country contexts. Given the extent of the private sector's involvement in ECE provision, particularly in the Caribbean,⁹⁸ enforcing standards across all program modalities ensures that all children receive quality care and education in their early years.

That said, it is also true that harshly enforced quality assurance and noncompliance penalties are an issue of equity for diverse children, families, ECE programs, and communities. Country contexts should exert caution with regards to quality assurance: mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation that repetitively measure without any paired protocol for providing targeted context-responsive and needs-based supports for quality improvement are ineffective. Data collection should be purposeful and carried out through an equity-oriented lens. This framework helps shift the culture of evaluation from one focusing on inspection and control to one based on accompanying centres in their efforts to improve. The OECD is currently conducting a policy review on "Quality Beyond Regulations in ECEC" which will likely prove useful to stakeholders engaged in conceptualizing a more holistic, supportive understanding of quality dimensions.

Currently, however, monitoring and quality assurance systems are more often than not fragmented and inaccessible, rather than centrally and coherently compiled and retrievable by the public.⁹⁹ To combat this, as described above, country contexts must engage in their own unique process in order to conceptualize and operationalize definitions and indicators of quality in their ECE programs. They must also determine how to measure or observe standards of quality using quantitative and/or qualitative data collection, and how they will utilize the results. Domains and indicators of ECE program quality, or the conditions, experiences, and environments that a country or regional context determines to be most conducive for young children's growth and development, can and should vary. However, within a particular context, consistent expectations must be maintained. Data collection coverage requires sufficient human resources in the field, while effective quality measurement requires that evaluators receive sufficient capacity building to be able to monitor reliably (over time and between evaluators). Both coverage and reliability require adequate funding.

In general, quality is often divided into structural dimensions and process dimensions. Some researchers additionally discuss caregiver dimensions and programmatic dimensions, but this report has previously covered these, as related to the UNICEF Conceptual Framework. The two most commonly studied aspects of structural quality are child-teacher ratios and group size.¹⁰⁰ Other aspects include variables such as infrastructure, years of experience and degrees or certifications acquired related to ECE, teacher salary, director salary, ample classroom space, ample outdoor space, an established curriculum, the availability of pedagogical materials, and licensing. Structural quality is vital to ensure adequate conditions of safety, water, nutrition, sanitation, and hygiene. Although much focus has been given to structural quality improvement, perhaps because it is more easily measured and monitored, process dimensions are critical for ensuring advances in child development outcomes that do not suffer the 'fade-out effect'.¹⁰¹

Process quality refers to less easily quantifiable characteristics such as varied and pedagogically adequate opportunities for play, participation, creativity, exploration, and relationship. Process quality focuses on the nature of routines, activities, and interactions between caregivers and children, amongst adults/staff, amongst children, and between children and the pedagogical space and materials. Though notably a non-LAC country context, a study by Mashburn et al. (2008) across 11 states of the United States showed that teachers' positive instructional and emotional interactions with 4-year-olds predicted academic, language, and social skills.¹⁰² Similarly, a recent study conducted in Peru showed that teachers with higher observed process quality (as measured by the CLASS tool) were associated with children with better development outcomes, in particular, communication, problem-solving, and fine motor skills (as measured by the ASQ-3).¹⁰³ In a previous study also employing CLASS, higher performance of Ecuadorian children attending the pre-primary year on math, language, and executive function tests was associated with teachers' behaviors and positive interactions.¹⁰⁴ In general, children who experience a warm relationship with their teachers are more excited about learning, more positive about coming to school, more self-confident, and achieve more in the classroom.¹⁰⁵ For young children, high-quality interactions need to be frequent, responsive to their interests, supportive of their cultural-linguistic identity, rich in language, warm, and sensitive to their needs. That said, as an indication of affect, they are highly culturally bound and therefore difficult to standardize across cultures and even within and between communities in a single country context. Protocols for observing process quality tend to be complex, time-intensive, and require specialized training, which presents a further challenge in quality assurance and improvement efforts.¹⁰⁶

There is a consensus in the ECE field that high process quality better predicts children's development and learning than structural quality.¹⁰⁷ Yet, structural and process quality are interrelated, in that structural variables identify and ensure the resources and environment needed to facilitate "warm" or "positive" interactions and emotional climate. Factors of structural quality -- such as smaller child-

teacher ratios, teachers' pre-service qualifications and participation in in-service training, and the existence of quality assurance mechanisms -- facilitate and are consistently positively correlated with process quality, particularly with teacher-child relationships across different types of ECE settings.^{108 109} The evidence available from the LAC region suggests extremely low levels of process quality,¹¹⁰ which illustrates the tension created by an expansion of access without a corresponding focus on ensuring quality. For example, Mexico and Chile boast a relatively high rate of ECE participation, with approximately 70% of young children enrolled (over 75% for four- to five-year-olds), as well as high rates of qualified ECE staff. However, the average child-teacher ratio in 2014 exceeded 25:1 in both countries (average 32:1 in Chile).¹¹¹ Uruguay faces a similar tension between an equitable, accessible ECE system and high child-teacher ratios of 25:1.¹¹² While there is no international gold standard for child-teacher ratios, it is logical that teachers have less time for positive and personal interactions with children -- not to mention active inclusion of children from non-dominant cultural-linguistic backgrounds -- when their attention is spread across a large group.

The level of quality that can be achieved by ECE programs is a direct function of the funding they receive and its allocation, which in turn is a direct function of political will or the investment of political capital. Low child-teacher ratios, for example, are inevitably expensive, especially if teachers receive adequate compensation. Similarly, training teachers in positive and meaningful interactions requires funding for professional development. Without a significant budget commitment, well-informed planning, and resource allocation, it is impossible to think about real improvement in the quality of ECE in the LAC region.

There is a discrepancy in the field with regards to whether quality assurance mechanisms should include child development outcomes. Naudeau et al. (2011) argue that monitoring child outcomes can prove beneficial in evaluating the impact of ECE policies or programs, as well as compare their efficacy and cost-efficiency, and therefore inform



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the policy dialogue for future planning.¹¹³ Myers (2006), on the other hand, critiqued the tendency of education ministries and other national-level stakeholders to employ standardized quantitative measures, which may not be appropriate for assessing young children from diverse backgrounds. Determining a common set of desired outcomes for young children becomes increasingly complicated at the national level (or beyond to an international level).¹¹⁴ For this reason, and in the face of the currently more prevalent reporting by parent or teacher (such as MICS), Yoshikawa and Kabay (2014) urge the development of direct child assessments that

are culturally responsive, holistic (covering multiple domains of development), and differentiated by age.¹¹⁵ The concern over measuring developmental or learning outcomes (not to mention primary school achievement or international comparative test performance, e.g., PISA or TIMSS) as a reflection of quality ECE programming in the early years has been echoed by many and merits further discussion.¹¹⁶ It is important to maintain a clear purpose for quality measurement in order to ensure that purpose is being served and to avoid confounding measures, such as child development measures with programmatic quality measures.

3. Regional Challenges and Successes in ECE Quality

This section addresses some examples of current efforts in the LAC region to address issues of ECE quality and systematically work towards quality improvement. In providing support to LAC countries in their ECE quality improvement processes, it is essential to: a) consider the unique sociopolitical and cultural context of the country, and b) address

gaps between the policies and practices that support quality according to evidence and the current realities. Many countries in the world have well-defined policies but poor implementation in practice due to resource constraints, flawed service delivery and/or a lack of quality assurance mechanisms.¹¹⁷

Planning and Resource Allocation

A regional highlight amongst early efforts in strategic planning and coordination was the Caribbean Community's Early Childhood Care, Education, and Development Plan of Action for 1997-2002. The plan featured an explicit appeal to base decisions concerning policy, practice, and resource allocation on scientific evidence.¹¹⁸ Following suit, in 2007, Chile introduced an intersectoral policy providing opportunities for early stimulation and development from birth called Chile Grows With You (*"Chile Crece Contigo"*), which was adopted into law in 2009 as part of the country's comprehensive social protection system. Under this policy, services are guaranteed for the most vulnerable children, including children from the poorest 40% of households and children with disabilities or developmental delays. There are institutional bodies tasked with supervision and support, operative action, as well as development, planning, and budgeting for each respective governance level from national to local,¹¹⁹ making *Chile Crece Contigo* one of LAC's best examples of vertical governance coordination.

As another major national success, Colombia has substantially increased government investment in ECE, facilitating the achievement of the triple combination of cross-sectoral coordination, vertical

governance coordination, and vertical alignment of early childhood development services. This was carried out by the Intersectoral Commission on Early Childhood through the formulation, starting in 2011, of the national reform strategy Comprehensive Care Plans for Early Childhood (*"Planes de Atención Integral para la Primera Infancia"*). In 2016, the From Zero to Always (*"De Cero a Siempre"*) strategy was adopted into law.¹²⁰ Stakeholders from the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF, attached to the Social Protection Ministry) which was historically responsible for ECE, along with the Ministry of Education and others, undertook a unique, context-based process of developing a conceptual framework for the reform -- including comprehensive standards, intended outcomes, and necessary inputs -- that allowed for significant local adaptation. The Local Community Model (*"Modalidad Propia"*) initiative provides an opportunity for local communities to design a culturally- and linguistically-responsive modality through flexible planning, resource allocation, and pedagogy. Intersectoral integration at the national level is reflected at the local level with child-focused committees called Early Childhood Working Groups (*"Mesas de Primera Infancia"*), which coordinate for vertical alignment with the Working Groups in Favour of Children and Adolescents

(“*Mesas de Infancia y Adolescencia*”) focused on older children. Yet, much depends on local government capacity and engaged uptake of both *Modalidad Propia* and the *Mesa de Primera Infancia* committees, leaving room for inequities across the country. Moreover, without an annual budget item, as is the case of primary or secondary education in Colombia, ECE programming is likely to demonstrate exacerbated inequities as budgetary allocation fluctuates.

Similarly, in Peru, a decentralized local resource allocation policy called Local Participatory Budgeting (“*Presupuesto Participativo Local*”) allows local governments to make context-based decisions on how to invest in ECE expansion and quality improvement. One study found, however, that some local governments allocate a disproportionate funding towards ECE infrastructure, rather than other areas of quality.¹²¹ This could be the result either of an as-of-yet lacking national quality definition and comprehensive quality standards linked to local implementation and practices, or of the results-based budgeting that the government encourages. Currently, Peru is developing a results-based budgeting program for ECD (“*Programa Presupuestal Orientado a Resultados para DIT*”), to be launched in 2020.

Uruguay has created a Coordinating Council for Early Childhood Education (“*Consejo Coordinador de la Educación en la Primera Infancia*”) in order to develop a national curricular framework to be adapted and used across the various modalities of ECE programs. Moreover, the National Strategy for Childhood and Adolescence (2010-2015), which defined the strategic plan to expand access to ECE, in particular for three- and four-year-olds from the lowest economic quintiles, demonstrates a successful multi-sectoral coordination effort. In conjunction with the budget bill for 2010-2014 that secured adequate funding, the National Strategy responded to children’s lack of access to ECE by expanding existing modalities and through the creation of a new modality called Child and Family Assistance Centres (“*Centros de Atención a la Infancia y la Familia*”). The National Strategy furthermore introduced objectives focused on improving the quality of programs such as increasing ongoing professional development for teachers. New,

differentiated professional qualifying criteria were established for the staff of different modalities, which could potentially lead to differences in quality.¹²² This LAC-region example illustrates the impact of strong planning, coordination, and resource allocation on the other components of the sector.

Jamaica offers a powerful example of how coordinated planning and allocation efforts can galvanize ECE quality improvement. The Early Childhood Commission (ECC) was established in 2003 and it includes representatives of all key ministries, the executive branch, the opposition political party, non-state actors, and early childhood experts in the health and education sectors. The ECC is responsible for developing standards and regulations for ECE facilities, advising the Ministry of Education on strategic planning related to early childhood, and monitoring the implementation of programs. In 2005, parliament passed the Early Childhood Act, the legal framework proposed by the ECC. Critically, the ECC also has legislative authority to enforce standards and impose sanctions. The Commission created the National Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Development (2008-2013) and the National Standards for Operation, Management, and Administration of Early Childhood Institutions to improve and standardize the quality of educational centres for early childhood development and create safe, quality spaces for children to enable them to reach their full potential. Demonstrating a successful manifestation of a feedback loop, a second National Strategic Plan is being implemented, (2014-2018) and a National Early Childhood Development Policy is being finalized. In this new version, the objectives associated with improving ECE program quality were continued but modified based on lessons learned in the first implementation cycle.

Across the LAC region, however, data on ECE programs and the children and families they serve are conspicuously lacking. There are some countries in the region, such as Guatemala and Nicaragua, where MICS have never been conducted. In the currently fragile context of Venezuela, MICS have not been collected in nearly 20 years. At the national level, statistical information and data collection in

Honduras is notably limited as well as fragmented. For example, the Education Statistics System ("*Sistema de Estadística Educativa*") utilizes data from 2012-2012, while the Administration of Education Programs System ("*Sistema de Administración de Centros Educativos*") uses data from 2014-2016.¹²³ In Argentina, the public policy information system called Integrated Information System on Public Policies for Children, Adolescents and Families ("*Sistema Integrado de Información de Políticas Públicas de Niñez Adolescencia y Familia*", SIIPNAF) was launched auspiciously in 2014, only to be

discontinued after 2016 due to lack of capacity and resources of local provinces to upload requested data. This indicates a lack of perceived utility of the data.¹²⁴ Data systems must be regarded and utilized across all levels of governance not merely as a repository of service delivery information, but rather as an active tool for quality enhancement and policy development.¹²⁵ A notable exception in the region, Peru has maintained transparency and accessibility of its active data collection efforts that support targeted ECE service provision.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

Colombia, with its long history of public investment in ECE, first disseminated a national curriculum to be utilized across centre-based and home-based settings in 1987.¹²⁶ The foundational document for the Ministry of National Education's current version of pedagogical guidelines and curricular framework ("*base curricular*") covers a holistic array of developmental areas, including communication, body awareness, social-emotional confidence, executive function and approaches to learning, and creativity and aesthetics. Notably, neither numeracy nor literacy skills receive significant focus, reflecting a context-based concerted resistance to pedagogy oriented towards "school readiness". Instead, the unique learning that takes place in early childhood is valued in its own right, drawing on the pillars of play, storytelling, art, and exploration of the environment. For country contexts in the process of developing a national curricular framework, a regional exemplar may be found in Colombia's Curricular Bases for Early and Preschool Education ("*Bases curriculares para la educación inicial y preescolar*"), most recently revised in 2017.¹²⁷ The *Modalidad Propia* model allows communities to adapt these guidelines to the local sociocultural context, or else develop their own.

Indeed, curricular frameworks should leave room for program- and context-specific adaptations.

Uruguay, has accomplished this rather successfully, allowing each ECE program to develop a centre-based plan detailing pedagogical objectives and demonstrating alignment with the national framework ("*Marco Curricular Común*") for children aged 0 to 6.¹²⁸ Paraguay's Curricular Framework for Preschool Education has also adopted an integral focus on three areas of learning: (a) personal and social development, (b) cognition, expression, and communication, and (c) connection/relation to the natural, social, and cultural environment.¹²⁹

A focus on meaningful play and positive interactions precipitate programs characterized by high process quality. Jamaica's national ECE curriculum for children 0-5 years old remains play-based,¹³⁰ despite global pressure towards academically-oriented school readiness. In 2017, the government of Chile announced one of several extensions of *Chile Crece Contigo* called Play Corner ("*Rincón de Juego*," RINJU), in which children up to age 9 have access to areas and spaces that are specifically dedicated to play. Simultaneously, the 2018 version of the national curriculum framework for ECE features a stronger focus on play and family engagement.¹³¹ Intentionality with regards to effective transitions across the age spectrum from birth onwards is manifested in the learning progress maps ("*mapas de progreso de aprendizaje*").¹³²



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A major challenge encountered in the LAC region with regards to curriculum and pedagogy is the disconnect between curriculum development and effective implementation. Increasingly, strong curricula are emerging from central and regional ministries of education across the area. Yet curricula implemented within ECE programs vary widely. Monitoring of applicability across contexts and modalities, as well as of gaps in professional capacities to adapt and implement curricular frameworks, must be undertaken to prevent

disconnects between policy and practice. For example, the Guatemalan Ministry of Education has developed a strong, competency-based national curriculum ("*Currículo Nacional Base*") at both the infant-toddler level and the pre-primary level. However, the curriculum is currently only available in Spanish on the Ministry of Education's website. In a country where the population is approximately 50% indigenous and speaks more than 20 languages, translation of the curriculum is critical to access and implementation.¹³³

Workforce

Research confirms that a qualified workforce is essential for ECE quality. This starts with basic pre-service qualification requirements. In Honduras, an ECE-specific teaching license is required of ECE teachers, although teachers with related degrees such as primary education or pedagogy can be considered. However, an assessment conducted for the Public Policy for the Comprehensive Development of Early Childhood (*"Política Pública para el Desarrollo Integral de la Primera Infancia"*) concluded that there are too few teachers with these degrees to cover the demand for ECE and also very limited opportunities for professional certification in ECE.¹³⁴

As a minimum standard of programmatic quality, Uruguay requires that at least half of the personnel are certified or enrolled in specific 500-hour courses related to education and health. For groups of four- and five-year-olds for whom ECE attendance is obligatory, teachers must hold a teaching certificate.¹³⁵ In Paraguay, legislation requires that directors hold a teacher certification or university degree, be knowledgeable of the curriculum framework, and have a minimum of three years of teaching experience in ECE.¹³⁶ The examples of Uruguay and Paraguay, however, also demonstrates a common predicament faced by countries across the region: a lack of certified professionals, from specialized teachers to those who monitor for quality assurance, prevents ECE programs from enforcing minimum qualification requirements *de facto*.

Similarly, in the case of Mexico, much like that of Argentina described in the first part of this report, a constitutional amendment requiring the provision of ECE to children from age 3 was instituted, to combat inequities for those living in rural and remote areas across the decentralized states. This resulted in a significant shortage of qualified teachers. In short, preparation and training have been insufficiently funded to meet the needs of the rapidly expanded demand, principally in ECE programs that serve the most at-risk populations. The most marginalized and rural communities generally cannot recruit

qualified teachers -- an obstacle faced by most countries globally. Indeed, the same multi-country study found a similar lack of qualified and specialized staff to present difficulties in attaining ECE quality in Peru. Another obstacle lies in highly dispersed rural populations and diverse indigenous groups' need for context-relevant and responsive services, which are not always possible because of the lack of professionals who can speak the local language. Even though equity has improved from an access lens in both of these countries, the quality offered across programs remains highly disparate.¹³⁷

As a response to the gap in qualified ECE teachers, Chile has led a major recruitment effort. The Vocation for Teaching Scholarship (*"Beca Vocación de Profesor"*) is a scholarship provided by the government to the top high school graduates to study ECE at the university level, including a semester of study abroad. The scholarship covers all education-related expenses as well as any potentially prohibitive costs, such as health insurance and transport. In exchange, the teachers must commit to at least 3 years of public-school teaching following fully paid certification.¹³⁸

The expansion and support of professional development opportunities, particularly in-service and coaching model approaches, are of critical importance in the LAC region. There is an expanding body of region-based research to support this. For example, an impact evaluation of an 18-month teacher training program showed positive impacts on observed quality as well as on children's health and behaviour in Colombia's Community Welfare Homes (*"Hogares Comunitarios"*) home-based ECE programs.¹³⁹ Additionally, a study on a 2-year teacher professional-development program for publicly funded pre-kindergarten and kindergarten in Chile found that participation was associated with large positive impacts on observed emotional and instructional support as well as classroom organization.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Jamaica's ECE system includes opportunities for ongoing classroom observation and feedback, as well as in-service training.

Professional development and workforce enhancement, however, can present complex issues and therefore requires systemic alignment with regards to quality. As one example, the Ministry of Education of Guyana, in coordination with GPE (Global Partnership for Education), recently promoted an integrated intervention that focused on three pillars of ECE workforce enhancement: a) providing capacity building for teachers, b) improving the supply of teaching and learning materials, and c) providing training to primary caregivers. To strengthen teacher effectiveness, a select cohort of over 500 teachers participated in an annual training program covering such topics as pedagogy, curricular content, phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, and the use of resource toolkits. Observational, on-site mentoring and support was provided by “master teachers”, although this approach took on a surveillance-style monitoring and evaluation focus. The content of professional development is reflected directly

in teachers’ pedagogical practices. The focus of this particular professional development effort demonstrates a more academically-oriented ECE environment than the Colombian orientation, for example. Data collected by the Ministry of Education showing increased literacy and numeracy skills further evidence a “school readiness” approach to ECE.¹⁴¹ While goals and expectations of ECE can and should differ across country contexts, a more holistic approach to early learning is recommended in the Guyana case. That said, a notable strength of the intervention was the dissemination of a teacher’s manual and toolkit for developing learning materials from locally-available resources that encourage cultural relevance. Also notable was the extensive parent education sessions offered during parent-teachers associations meetings and parent-teacher conferences, as well as home-visits. A media campaign was also launched for families with children under 5, addressing their role in supporting their child’s development.

Family and Community Engagement

ECE programs and policies in Colombia have historically promoted family and community engagement due in part to the expansion of ECE services called Children’s Homes (“*Hogares Infantiles*”) in the 1970s through the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF). In 1986, these efforts evolved into Community Welfare Homes (“*Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar*”), promoting decentralized local community empowerment and well-being, as well as women’s leadership in operating the home-based programs.¹⁴² With the onset of the *De Cero a Siempre* ECE policy reform, many of these centres have been converted to large Child Development Centres (“*Centros de Desarrollo Infantil*”), but the historical connection to families and the community remains, evidenced by the presence of social workers, psychologists, and other community health staff.¹⁴³ A national quality assessment conducted in Colombia in 2017 (using a context-responsive adaptation of

MELQO, or the Measure for Early Learning Quality Outcomes) showed high rates of multi-sectoral service provision across *De Cero a Siempre* programs, as well as the availability of family participation workshops based on community/cultural situation analyses.¹⁴⁴ Yet, on average, less than half of families participated, demonstrating a further need to understand what drives community and family engagement. A comprehensive policy analysis and evaluation of *De Cero a Siempre* completed by the government of Colombia in 2018 self-reported the continued challenge of equitable implementation of quality programming, particularly for minority ethnic groups.¹⁴⁵

Cuna Más, the largest provider of publicly-funded ECE in urban Peru, offers an important example of targeting integrated early childhood development programs from an equity lens, with the objective of reducing poverty. Specifically, the home-visiting

program emphasises parental employment, positive parenting, and child development, particularly for children aged 0 to 3. While promoting play and learning, home visits also serve in child protection monitoring and reporting.¹⁴⁶ This draws significant concern regarding the initiative's paternalistic stance towards poor and marginalized (rural and/or indigenous) communities, and whether the initiative has sufficiently considered and engaged the perspectives of these communities through participatory dialogue.

The Early Education ("*Educación Inicial*") program, started in 1993 as part of the National Council for the Promotion of Education ("*Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo*"; CONAFE) of Mexico, is a targeted, community-based ECE program for children, pregnant women, and the parents of children aged 0 to 4 years living in rural areas or urban areas with high levels of marginalization, as well as indigenous populations. The program involves home-visiting, multiple forms of parent education, and direct centre-based service provision, all of which contribute toward the child's smooth transition into preschool at age 4. The challenge presented in the Peruvian *Cuna Más* case, however, is overcome by the community instructors ("*instructores comunitarios*") who are often familiar with the community, its context, and culture. That said, it is notable that they rarely have teaching qualifications.¹⁴⁷ Similar community-based ECE programs exist in Guatemala (Community Homes or "*Hogares Comunitarios*") and Bolivia (Comprehensive Child Development Program or "*Programa Integral de Desarrollo Infantil*"). These have been shown to have nominal impacts on children's health and nutrition, in the Guatemalan case, and physical, language, and social-emotional development outcomes, in the Bolivian case. Again, program quality and impact were hindered by the caregivers' limited knowledge of child development, safety, and effective care practices.¹⁴⁸

In contrast to the targeted approach that is common throughout the LAC region (e.g. the National Board of Day-Care Centres or "*Junta Nacional de Jardines Infantiles*" network of daycare and preschools

begun in Chile in 1970, or INTEGRA, another Chilean ECE initiative),¹⁴⁹ Uruguay's ECE services, *Crece Contigo*, are available to all families. The monitoring and evaluation guidelines for Uruguay's Child and Family Centres ("*Centros de Atención a la Infancia y a la Familia*") explicitly addresses the need for positive relations and communication between the program, the staff, the children, and the families, emphasizing solidarity and collaboration in contrast with competitiveness.¹⁵⁰ However, there is a need to increase families' awareness of the benefits of ECE, especially in the most at-risk geographic areas of Uruguay.¹⁵¹ Both the National Public Education Association and National Institute for Children and Adolescents of Uruguay have carried out campaigns to promote ECE, but with varying degrees of effectiveness, indicating a potential mismatch between the needs of families and ECE programs based on formal educational settings. A study of five LAC countries found a region-wide lack of flexible programming alternatives to centre-based care.¹⁵²

Cuba's well-regarded and nearly universally-frequented Educate your Child ("*Educa a Tu Hijo*") initiative, presents a prime example of family and community engagement, as well as creative and informal ECE programming within limited resources. Weekly group sessions held in community spaces (e.g., parks) provide families with an opportunity to learn ways to promote and stimulate their child's development. The group facilitators, moreover, actively connect families to comprehensive health and social services and supports based on observed needs, and are charged with the responsibility of identifying possible developmental delays as well as social concerns such as maltreatment, substance abuse, or parental mental illness. Inclusive pedagogical practices and skills in orchestrating social cohesion are critical to the work of the facilitators.¹⁵³ It is significant to mention that Cuba's approach to ECE emerged from a multi-year, evidence-based development process that intentionally integrated the sociocultural values of the country.¹⁵⁴

As in Cuba, Chile, and others, Jamaica frames families -- and specifically parents -- as the key

stakeholders and actors in children's early learning and development. In fact, the country enacted a progressive and unique National Parenting Support Policy starting in 2012.¹⁵⁵ In Jamaica, the approach to general ECE access and quality improvement are universal, but with specific targeted provision of services and supports

for children and families with disabilities or developmental delays. This is made possible by the purposeful development of a system for early screening identification and referral and the broad implementation of a related screening tool. Thus, multi-sectoral data effectively and efficiently informs multi-sectoral action.

Quality Assurance and Improvement Mechanisms

According to a recent study on ECE in 10 countries across the LAC region, "governments are acknowledging the need to establish regulations to run [ECE] services, setting standards for equipment, safety, and building conditions, implementing registration, oversight and inspection systems for institutions, particularly for those administered by the private sector. However, this process is slow and unequal, hindered by insufficient investment" (p.10).¹⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the establishment of more comprehensive quality standards and concomitant monitoring and improvement mechanisms still lack in many LAC countries.

Honduras presents a common case in which structural quality standards, including infrastructure indicators such as adequate light and ventilation and child-sized toilets, physical presence of specific pedagogical materials such as wooden construction blocks and puzzles, and visibly defined areas of the classroom, are addressed explicitly in the 2014 Basic Standards for ECE Program Quality (*"Estándares Básicos para la Gestión de un Modelo Educativo de Calidad del Nivel de Educación Prebásica"*). Moreover, group size must not exceed 30, and the child-teacher ratio is set at a minimum of 15:1 and a maximum of 25:1. Process quality standards, on the other hand, are basic and intangible, with the curriculum calling on teachers to cultivate dialogue and debate, demonstrate love and affection, and "always smile."¹⁵⁷ This example illuminates the urgent global call for stakeholders in ECE to focus on improving the quality of interactions between adults -- parents, teachers, daycare workers

-- and young children rather than focusing on building infrastructure, for example.¹⁵⁸ These are the kinds of budgeting trade-offs related to planning and resource allocation referenced in the third section of this report.

Uruguay's ECE policy has determined structural quality standards such as child-teacher ratios (differentiated by children's ages, e.g., 3:1 for one-year-olds and 20:1 for five-year-olds) and hygiene, health, and safety. These standards are utilized to authorize operation and biannually regulate public and private ECE programs. Failure to meet the requirements results in sanctions. The curricular framework for children aged 0-6 (*"El Marco Curricular para la Atención y Educación de Niñas y Niños Uruguayos Desde el Nacimiento a los Seis Años"*) establishes the fundamental principle of relationships as necessary for promoting significant interactions between children and with the adults surrounding them. Specifically, the curricular themes include the theme of "coexistence", during which children should develop their ability to "feel recognized and accepted for their uniqueness" (p.32).¹⁵⁹

In Chile, quality assurance of pre-primary education covers aspects of regulation compliance, staff performance, leadership and management, children's learning outcomes, evidence of utilized curriculum program, and financial sustainability, but does not monitor such aspects as child well-being or parental satisfaction.¹⁶⁰ Monitoring focuses predominantly on structural quality rather than process quality and serves accountability efforts more than policy



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development, planning, resource allocation, or capacity building. It is important for country contexts to self-assess whether quality insurance is being used to punitively regulate programs or else to support them in quality improvement. In Chile, an education think tank called Choosing to Educate ("*Elige Educar*") has produced a set of process quality indicators that have been explicitly adapted to the Chilean context and could be incorporated into the national ECE quality framework.¹⁶¹ Jamaica's ECE monitoring system is based on 12 national standards that include required and recommended standards. For programs to be fully registered with the Early Childhood Commission, a multisectoral advisory and regulatory body, they must have satisfied all 12 standards through document submission and inspection.

Quality assurance depends not only on establishing quality standards to be monitored but also on concerted improvement. Programs that undertake quality improvement efforts show better learning

outcomes when compared to standard programs, as evidenced by studies conducted in Jamaica, Costa Rica, and Chile.¹⁶² In Jamaica, considerable efforts have been invested in improving the quality of existing preschools, and progress has been made in the process of certification, regulation, and monitoring of comprehensive quality standards. Ecuador and Peru are also working to improve the quality of public ECE services.¹⁶³ Further, several countries in the LAC region, such as Costa Rica, have developed self-evaluation tools for use by ECE programs to improve quality, though these are too unreliable to be useful at the composite level. Research indicates that direct observation instruments used to evaluate ECE quality predict child outcomes to a significantly higher degree than interviews or checklists.¹⁶⁴

A variety of ECE quality measures have been utilized in the LAC region. Many of these scales, including CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System),

ITERS (Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale) for children aged 0-2.5 and ECERS (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale) for children aged 3-6, CIS (Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale), MITRCC (Missouri Infant Toddler Responsive Caregiving Checklist, and ORCE (Observational Record of the Caregiving Environment) have been adapted from a foreign sociocultural context to one or more LAC countries. Others, such as MELQO (Measure for Early Learning Quality) or Save the Children's IDELA (International Development & Early Learning Assessment), which both include a child development outcomes component, were purposefully designed to be adapted and implemented internationally and across cultures,¹⁶⁵ although it must be noted that IDELA was not piloted in any LAC country during its three-year development. However, the adaptation -- or considerably worse, adoption without adaptation -- of these quality measures is highly discouraged without, first and foremost, an intentional, participatory process of determining a definition of context-based quality, to which any proposed measure would need to fit. Since "there is evidence that definitions of quality and their operationalization in many low-income countries have been heavily influenced by knowledge from high-income countries,"¹⁶⁶ particularly via for-profit companies from the United States as well as knowledge-disseminating international organizations offering technical guidance, the issue of ensuring adaptability across contexts requires critical attention.

Indeed, there is a growing international movement and inspiration to develop tools that are designed for context-specific quality measurement based on the unique national process of defining quality. In Mexico, context-specific ECE program quality measurement was developed with extensive collective stakeholder input as well as pilot measurement in a variety of settings across the

country. A case study of a similar effort in Chile's A Good Start ("*Un Buen Comienzo*") program showed that opportunities for a variety of stakeholders to collectively develop a contextually-responsive program quality measure helped build motivation, reduce isolation, and effectively improve quality.¹⁶⁷

Should adaptation of an existing, "globally applicable" tool prove necessary, it is recommended that items are compared with ECE programmatic quality and curricular standards, are modified or eliminated based on cultural elements as well as empirical analysis, are piloted within the country context, and are further adjusted.¹⁶⁸ One such concertedly context-responsive quality measurement adaptation is that of MELQO to the Colombia context.¹⁶⁹ The purpose of the study on quality was to garner comparable and more detailed data on ECE service provision and the correlation between quality and comprehensive child development, with a particular focus on uncovering inequities in quality.

If child development standards are to be measured as well, the low and middle income countries of the region may refer to the comprehensive Toolkit for Measuring Early Childhood Development in Low and Middle-Income Countries. This toolkit includes 147 measures compiled by a group of public health and human development researchers at the Universities of California and of Nebraska (<http://dide.minedu.gob.pe/handle/MINEDU/5723>). Notable examples of adaptations of child development outcomes measurements in the LAC region include: UNICEF's Early Childhood Development Index component of MICS, the Inter-American Development Bank's PRIDI, adaptations of the Early Human Capability Index in Brazil, the Early Development Instrument and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire in Peru, and the Child Development Evaluation in Mexico.

4. The Path Forward and Technical Recommendations for Improving Quality

As laid out in UNICEF's Programme Guidance 2018-2021, ECE-related policies and programs -- and the strategic alternatives for guiding their improvement in terms of the guiding principles of the Conceptual Framework, i.e. equity, efficiency, responsiveness, collaboration, and coordination -- will differ across countries because they need "to be adapted to leverage the strengths of the context and respond to the needs" (p.20).¹⁷⁰ For example, the needs of children and families in emergency (conflict, violence, climate change, economic and political instability, disease, and disaster) contexts are unique, given the high levels

of toxic stress involved, and services should address these particular needs first and foremost. In contexts with low and medium levels of resources, an initial focus can be to undergo a process defining quality and establishing standards to activate quality assurance and improvement. Continuous reassessment and context-responsive adaptation of planning and resource allocation based on data and new research evidence are critical for all contexts. Moreover, the perspectives and empowerment of families, caregivers, and communities must take precedent across all contexts.¹⁷¹



Countries in the LAC region may consider the following recommendations:

Planning and Resource Allocation

- » Strengthen integration and horizontal coordination across sectors, vertical coordination across governance levels, and vertical alignment from birth onwards, establishing policy directives and clear governance structures, roles, and responsibilities in order to identify gaps and potentially beneficial adjustments to planning efforts.
- » Strengthen public financing of ECE quality and develop well-informed and strategic innovations in the allocation of funds that support all elements of the sector in order to consistently and sustainably invest in ECE as a basic right of children.
- » Invest equitably to ensure that children with disabilities, children in emergency situations (conflict, violence, climate change, economic and political instability, disease, and disaster), and children from remote, poor or otherwise marginalized families and communities have access to quality ECE programs.
- » Support and ensure sustainable funding of data collection on quality and quality improvement by improving data- and evidence-gathering systems (collection, demographic disaggregation, analysis, and sharing) to inform planning, resource allocation, policy, and innovation, as well as track targeted needs, reduce inequities, and monitor progress towards the SDG targets related to young children, especially 4.2.
- » Include ECE in an Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan (EPRP) with a pre-established cohort of ECE and emergency experts and explicit policy protocols to delineate supports for displaced children or other impacts of emergency situations (conflict, violence, climate change, economic and political instability, disease, and disaster).

Curriculum and Pedagogy

- » Develop a curricular framework or guidelines to reflect country- or region-specific ECE goals and align to teacher pre- and in-service teacher training, as well to monitoring and evaluation efforts, in order to ensure wide-reaching implementation.
- » Ensure equitable opportunities for context-responsive adaptation and responsiveness for diverse children.
- » Consider holistic child development and learning outcomes, including less “measurable” factors such as empathy, cooperation, creativity, or critical thinking.
- » Consider increased use of inclusive pedagogical approaches that honour culturally relevant, non-didactic modes of teaching and learning such as intent participation and learning through play.
- » Value cultural and linguistic diversity, especially regarding indigenous and minority languages, and encourage the use of familiar language and value multilingualism as an asset.
- » Activate early screening and support interventions for children at risk of developmental delays and disabilities.
- » Optimize vertical alignment and transitions from the home to ECE programs to primary school in order to facilitate a coordinated, sequential strategy for promoting early learning, especially through meaningful play.

Workforce

- » Incentivize higher pre-service qualification attainment through scholarships and other creative means to ensure that teachers and other levels of the workforce are well-prepared.
- » Support frequent and equitable access to meaningful, on-going professional growth opportunities to ensure that teachers and other levels of the workforce are continuously advancing.
- » Cultivate positive and meaningful interactions in the classroom by expanding on-site and on-going teacher coaching.
- » Target workforce development to the most vulnerable areas, and consider incentivizing highly qualified teachers towards vulnerable areas.
- » Provide pre-service and in-service teachers with knowledge about early childhood development, age-appropriate learning environments and styles, and methods for teaching interdisciplinary foundational concepts and skills such as symbolic thinking and inquiry with an emphasis on the power of interactions and positive discipline.
- » Improve the psychological, sociological, and physical work conditions and compensation of teachers; adequately reward, including salary increases, recruit experienced and effective teachers to encourage retention; equalize ECE teacher salaries with those of primary teachers.

Family and Community Engagement

- » Engage families from an equity approach rather than a majority approach, with a focus on cultural-responsiveness and honouring multilingualism as an asset.
- » Collect information regarding families' beliefs and socio-cultural practices, attitudes about childhood and education, home language, financial and health (including mental health) circumstances, and need for continuity of comprehensive, wraparound services, such as early morning care or health and nutrition services.
- » Plan, implement and assess the effectiveness of a variety of family and community engagement strategies.
- » Ensure bi- and multi-directional communication in families' home languages.
- » Exchange information regularly with families and adopt consistent approaches to socialization, daily routines, child development, and learning, to empower families to participate in their child's continuous learning and growth.
- » Strategically engage fathers in early learning activities.

Quality Assurance and Improvement Mechanisms

- » Define a national definition (or multiple definitions) of quality, engaging in a participatory process a variety of stakeholders, including health, urban planning, social protection, emergency response, labour, and cultural development sectors.
- » Develop or adapt (rather than adopt) holistic quality standards that align with the above definition.
- » Design or adapt (not adopt) purposeful quality measurement and assurance mechanisms based on quality standards and allow for adjustments and additions when used in local contexts.
- » Ensure effective and reliable quality measurement by providing sufficient capacity building to evaluators.
- » Ensure that quality assurance and monitoring inform quality improvement at the ECE program level and the system planning and policy level.
- » Disaggregate demographic data to understand whether there are specific groups of children underserved by ECE services.
- » Focus continuous quality improvement on process quality such as teacher-child positive interactions and children's engagement in free play, which are related to improved child development and learning outcomes, rather than structural quality factors, such as low child-teacher ratios (bearing in mind that the latter can indirectly create the conditions for the former).
- » It is also important to consider cultivating positive interactions amongst teachers, amongst children, and between families and staff members, by shifting from an environmental ethos of competitiveness to one of solidarity and collaboration.

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