
Tankersley, D. & Ionescu, M. (2016) 'The ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy: Quality Early Childhood Education and Care through democratic processes', in *Learning for Well-being Magazine*, Issue 1, published by Universal Education Foundation.

The ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy: Quality Early Childhood Education and Care through democratic processes

By Dawn Tankersley & Mihaela Ionescu

A fundamental point in assessing quality in early education settings is the belief in the right of young children to democratically and actively participate in their education and care processes. Early education and care is undertaken *with* children and their families and *not* to children. This right is clearly embedded in ISSA's *Principles of Quality Pedagogy*, a quality framework that guides pedagogical staff in ensuring that children's voices, as well as the voices of their families, are heard, incorporated into everyday pedagogical practice, and build on children's strengths and interests. ISSA (International Step by Step Association) is an association of organisations who support professional communities in early childhood education and care. It has been working for over 20 years with teachers, head teachers, preschools, training institutions, local authorities, ministries and other professionals from more than 27 countries primarily from Central Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) to promote child agency and well-being in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. ISSA considers that it is important to develop strong civil societies that can influence and assist decision-makers in providing high quality care and education services for every child from birth to primary school. Its work is grounded in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

ISSA also believes in the importance of democratic processes for guiding pedagogical staff's professional development, for building a shared understanding among themselves and their communities, and for empowering them to contribute to exploring and defining quality in practice. This is why over 15 years ago, we embarked on the challenging journey to define the quality of early childhood development services in ways that specifically address the use of participatory, democratic practices and the UNCRC. What began as a mission to introduce child-centred practices in former countries of the Soviet Union, evolved into the development of standards that would guide educators and assist

them in exploring ways to fulfil a mission to help children and their families to democratically and actively participate in their education and care processes. Defining quality meant identifying what mattered and developing a framework to support practitioners in their everyday practice.

Grounded in and bridging early childhood practice, theory and research, ISSA's *Principles of Quality Pedagogy*¹ and the accompanying *Quality Resource Pack*² are the result of this work. The aim is that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners can explore, reflect upon, prioritise, and adapt (if needed) them through discussion and mutual support. In that way the Principles have become a platform for practitioners to critically reflect on and enrich the definition of quality practices, take ownership and bring them to life in their daily work. ISSA believes that the *quality of the process* of pedagogical practices in ECEC settings matters the most, as it shapes the relationships, interactions and contexts in which children learn and develop. Quality is not something a priori defined to be implemented by educators, but a construct and a 'product' of the daily activity in early childhood settings where educators play a central role.

What matters in ISSA's Principles of Quality Pedagogy

There is consensus that quality in early childhood settings is essential to protect young children's rights and to promote their optimal well-being, development and learning. According to Moss (2007 p3) democratic practice is also important because 'it is a mean by which children and adults can participate collectively in shaping decisions affecting themselves, groups of which they are members, and the wider society. Today such participation is recognised as a right of children in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.'

Hence the importance that the young child is seen as a citizen today and is not just being educated to become one for the future. As a current citizen, they have 'a strong voice, rights and responsibilities to develop a sense of empathy and concern for others, openness and respect for diversity, to acquire skills to form, express, and justify their opinions, to listen respectfully and be tolerant of the opinion of others, and to resolve conflict' (ISSA, 2009 p16).

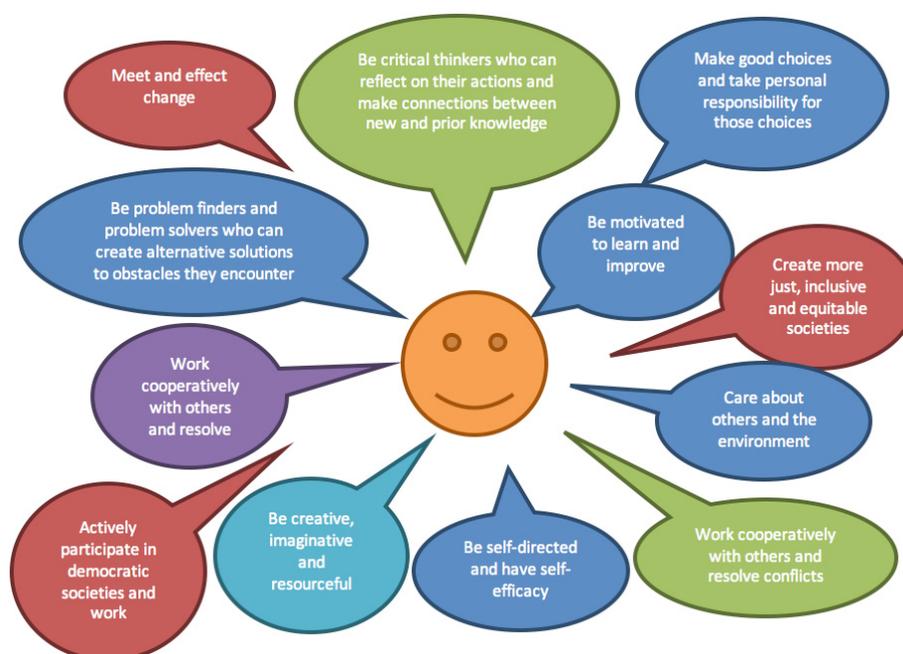
The Principles represent the experiences of early education experts in countries that went through a profound democratic transformation two decades ago (Tankersley, 2015). As a result, they demonstrate an acute awareness of why democratic and inclusive values and practices need to be embedded in early education systems and how they should look. They incorporate over twenty years of experience from the CEE/CIS region as

1 <http://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/Quality-Principles-final-WEB.pdf>

2 <http://www.issa.nl/content/quality-resource-pack>

well as what has been defined as quality practice in other European and global literature and documents. The document, 'Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy in 2009' (based on a previous version 'ISSA Pedagogical Standards' drawn up in 2003) was developed with the intention of creating a shared vision of what quality means when looking at the methodologies employed by practitioners in early childhood education and care services. Both the original Standards and the subsequent Principles were developed through collaboration with experts and practitioners from the ISSA network to ensure that they reflected common values and beliefs. They contribute to creating an image of the child, of families and of educators that are crucial for providing enabling environments for a child's development and well-being.

The Principles address the skills needed by educators to best prepare children for living in the 21st century in order to be able to:



Respect for and the inclusion of diversity came to the forefront of the ISSA Principles as we began to develop greater understanding of the necessity of improving it in the region in which we were working. As some ISSA members began to work for the inclusion of early childhood education opportunities for Roma children and families as well as the inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream education, it was clear that greater focus needed to be placed on challenging educators to reflect on their own beliefs and everyday practices in regards to social inclusion and inclusion of children with special needs, which did not exist under Communist governments. Diversity and inclusion are a vehicle for creating strong civil societies and social cohesion, beginning with the youngest and most vulnerable. They need to be living values embedded in the everyday practices; therefore, they need to be part of the complex

concept of quality.

The Principles have also been the cornerstone of ISSA's professional development efforts. As a document elaborated by civil society, its purpose has been envisaged more as an instrument to *build* quality, not to *define* it in its entirety or from a single vantage point. Although its accompanying tools can be used in assessment processes, it is not designed to be an evaluation of an educator's knowledge or skills, but rather a point for opening dialogue about practice and seeking improvement. As many of the principles and indicators in the document require dialogue with children, families, and communities, quality is only achieved in partnership with them and not by the actions of a single educator.

The Principles have contributed to improvements in individual educators' teaching skills, but have also influenced the larger preschool/school community and culture, broadened community involvement in early childhood education, and influenced a number of policy decisions around quality early childhood education in the countries where ISSA's members have worked (Howard et al., 2010).³ In some countries, ministries of education used the Principles to develop their own pedagogic standards for early childhood programmes or for teacher professional standards. In other countries, the Principles were also used to influence the development of national curricula and of early learning standards. In other countries, the extensive use of Principles created a 'culture' of quality and strengthened the concept of mentoring. They are a tool that practitioners, service managers, education authorities, and even families⁴ and communities can use to promote quality in services for young children and can assist in opening and facilitating dialogue about democratic participation.

Quality as shared meaning

It is important when discussing standards of quality to first recognise that quality is not a static phenomenon, but an on-going process that requires the building of shared values and meanings. The term 'quality' is a value and a culturally based concept (UNICEF, 2012) that may be difficult to measure in the same way across contexts. Measures of quality must take into account the multiple strengths and needs of young children, their families and their communities. Quality services are those that are 'child and family centred', not 'provider-centred' (Tankersley, Vonta, and Ionescu, 2015).

Quality early childhood practice requires being culturally responsive and contextually/situationally relevant. There needs to be a balance between sensitivity to the cultural context and meaningful constructs that have validity across cultures and contexts. Change, complexity, and

3 For more information see: <http://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/Quality-Executive-Summary-FINAL.pdf>.

4 See the leaflets that were developed based on ISSA Principles to be used by educators, decision-makers and parents as advocates for quality: <http://www.issa.nl/content/advocacy-tools>

uncertainty are very much a part of life in the 21st century. Educators, leaders, and managers need to be able to reflect on the complexity and uncertainty that exist in their communities and be able to respond to what this means for the children and families they serve and the environments in which they work (Miller and Cable, 2011). It is through listening to, reflecting upon children's, families, community members' and other practitioners' voices, needs, and preferences, and negotiation among these different parties that a common ground for communication and shared understanding is achieved. For example: Do all children need sleeping time incorporated into their programme?; What should the drop-off and pick up times be?; How are families who speak other languages welcomed into the programme?

Becoming a competent educator who works towards quality practice is the result of a continuous learning process: a process through which one's own practices and beliefs are constantly questioned in relation to changing contexts (Urban et al, 2011). Early childhood educators also need democratic participation in their own professionalisation in order to support their agency in their learning processes and to build relationships and alliances with colleagues, communities, local education authorities, national training and research institutions, and policy-makers. Early childhood educators can make a contribution as co-constructors to a profession that is continuously evolving as more input is received and upon greater critical reflection of that input (Peeters, 2008). Educators are not just consumers of pedagogical knowledge, research and theory. They should have the right and responsibility to equally contribute to it as they encounter new challenges in their practice, information, and situations.

Recent research (Eurofound, 2015) shows that early childhood educators need more than just knowledge and skills in order to provide quality learning experiences for their children; they also need to be able to critically reflect on those experiences. Tools that help educators reflect upon and make connections between the dimensions of knowledge, practice and values contribute to a definition of quality that is owned and embraced by those that actually translate quality in practice.

The *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* are about process quality, meaning that they have been defined to influence the practices employed by practitioners in their day-to-day activities. Through their comprehensiveness, the Principles reflect not only the complexity of the early childhood educator profession, but also the values that are to be cherished when defining quality pedagogy: child agency and uniqueness, democratic learning environment and practices, inclusiveness and diversity, family as partners and co-decision-makers, communities as active actors in the child's development and learning and continuous professional development. Unpacking these values in principles and indicators for high quality practice means translating a vision of quality into reality through critical reflection and social constructivist processes.

Collaborative processes – a means for using ISSA's Principles of Quality Pedagogy in practice

ISSA is a strong promoter of collaborative processes to promote practitioners' critical reflection on their practice. Peer observation, peer mentoring, and/or professional learning communities are supported by ISSA Pedagogical Principles and its accompanying resources.

Observing oneself and others is a skill that can be developed and increases shared understanding of quality practice. Observing colleagues in a safe and inclusive learning environment makes teaching a public rather than a private act, where all can benefit: the educators who are being observed; the educators observing; and the children in the classroom. Peer observation requires a level trust that the focus of the process will be on reflecting how children can be more engaged and supported in their learning, rather than a performance evaluation. Using an agreed framework such as the ISSA Principles, gives those observing each other a touchstone for their observations and later dialogue about what the core values, beliefs and practices that build democratic participation in children, in families and in educators are.

Peer mentoring and coaching are other forms of professional collaboration that increase critical reflection. Peer mentoring is even more helpful when the person who is being observed gives the observer(s) specific things that s/he wants them to pay attention to during an observation. The point in these kinds of observations is not necessarily to get general advice on pedagogical practice, but to help the two colleagues reflect on the consequences of educators' actions. A peer mentor's role is to help an educator better express the experiences, feelings, needs, ambitions and goals s/he has and to help build on their strengths, and aspirations. These are all ingredients of quality.

Sometimes educators form what are called professional learning communities to better support each other in their pedagogical practice. A professional learning community is more than a group of professionals that regularly meet, for example for staff meetings or for training. They have the goal of developing a shared vision together and engaging in inquiry and problem solving about daily teaching practice in their particular teaching context. Their aim is to seek quality improvement and increase their professionalism through mutual trust, support and learning. Professional learning communities can consist of groups of educators who work at the same preschool/school, groups of preschools/schools or even on-line communities. They are democratic meeting places that include the voices of all of their members through dialogue and reflection on the conditions that support all children to meet their potential by recognising their agency. This includes reflecting upon what the purpose of early childhood education is; discovering hidden assumptions about how children learn or what the most important thing they learn is, evaluating the worth of what early childhood educators do in their classrooms,

and imagining other possibilities (Brajkovic, 2014). As such they are a place to uncover and challenge beliefs and practices that undermine the development of community and democracy.

These are authentic ways for including educators in the complex discourse about quality and build on their agency as co-constructors of the meaning of quality pedagogy. The Quality Principles are a framework for discussions, a roadmap. By engaging all key actors in collective thinking and in critical reflection about the underlying values of daily practice and the impact of our actions as enacted values, we acknowledge that quality is not a given, it is created. Quality is not just a document, but a shared value and understanding around what matters most for children to grow, develop and learn and how we should continuously (re)consider our practices to meet their needs and potential.

Conclusion

Democratic practices are an important element of quality education at all levels; from how educators work with children and families to how educators themselves are learning and how they are contributing to defining quality. The *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy*, their accompanying resources, and the collaborative mechanisms for reflecting on pedagogical practice (observation, peer mentoring and professional learning communities) not only help early childhood educators be more democratic in their practice, they also support them to grow as professionals in ways that give them greater voice in the field. They are the ones that can make quality process happen.

As a framework for quality, the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy* play multiple roles: guiding the discussions and dialogue around quality processes, offering a platform for learning and improvement through its accompanying tools, and encouraging the enrichment of the meaning of quality by engaging practitioners in translating principles into practice.

Authors

ISSA (International Step by Step Association) is the leading professional association for early education and care in Europe and Central Asia. ISSA unites over 65 member organisations from over 40 countries, around the shared mission to improve the quality of and access to early years' services. Primarily focused on children from birth to 10 years and their families, ISSA promotes inclusive, quality care and education experiences that create the conditions for every child to be happy and reach their full potential (www.issa.nl).

Dr Mihaela Ionescu is Programme Director in ISSA and Dr. Dawn Tankersley is ISSA's Programme Specialist. Working closely with experts from ISSA's members, they have both been extensively involved in articulating ISSA's approach towards improving the quality of practices

in early childhood settings, using the experience gathered from working with ISSA's Principles of Quality Pedagogy and the accompanying resources in more than 20 countries from Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

References

- Brajkovic, S. (2014), *Professional learning communities*. Leiden: ISSA.
- European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. (2015). *Early childhood care: working conditions, training and quality of services – A systematic review*. Dublin: Author.
- Howard, M., Tuna, A., Cincilei, C., Rajabova, T., Vonta, T., and Tankersley, D. (2010), *Study on the implementation of the ISSA Pedagogical Standards and their impact on ECDE Policies and practices in the region of ISSA's network and beyond (2001-2008)*. Budapest, HG: International Step by Step Association.
- International Step by Step Association (2010), *Competent teachers of the 21st century: Principles of quality pedagogy*. Amsterdam: ISSA.
- Miller, L. and Cable, C. (eds) (2011), *Professionalization, leadership and management in early years*. London: Sage.
- Moss, P. (2007), 'Bringing politics into the nursery. Early Childhood education as a democratic practice', *Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 15 (1): 3–20.
- Peeters, J. (2008), *The construction of a new profession: A European perspective on professionalism in early childhood education and care*. Amsterdam: SWP Publishers.
- Tankersley, D., Ionescu M., (coord.) (2015), *Roads to quality: Strengthening Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care Systems*. Leiden: ISSA.
- Tankersley, D., Vonta, T. and Ionescu, M. (2015), 'Quality in early childhood settings: universal values and cultural flexibility' in *Early Childhood Matters* June/124, The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- UNICEF (2012). *A framework and tool box for monitoring and improving quality*. Draft. New York.
- Urban, M., Vandebroek, M., Peeters, J., Lazzari, A., and Van Laere, K. (2011), *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*. CoRe Final Report. Brussels: European Commission.
- Salmon, A., (June 26, 2015). *Do we measure what we treasure?* Retrieved from <http://www.unescobkk.org/education/news/article/do-we-measure-what-we-treasure/>