

## Quality Assurance

### Quality affects how much children benefit

There is clear evidence that early childhood development (ECD) is a good investment in the future, and international research has pinpointed factors that contribute to good ECD programmes. But quality is key to ensuring that the investment in ECD achieves the returns that research suggests are possible. ECD can play a role in reducing poverty and improving the prospects for individual children and the country as a whole, but will not achieve these results, nor will it be as successful at achieving these results, if the services and programmes that are offered are not of high quality.

There are many different ways to conceptualise and measure quality in ECD. Some commonly used indicators of quality programmes, based on literature, are: involvement of parents, adequate adult-child interaction, suitable programme (clear, relevant), evidence that children take an active role in their own learning through play, suitable and well-organised physical space, stable routines and on-going team training (Peralta, 2008). Other indicators of quality include cultural sensitivity and awareness, community ownership, consensus about desired outcomes, appropriate management plans and monitoring and evaluation systems (Irwin et al, 2007). Research suggests that the average level of quality in ECD, in both developed and developing countries, is not high enough to ensure that all children reap the benefits of early investment (Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead, 2009).

Quality cannot be seen as a static set of indicators imposed from outside (Peralta 2008), which is one of the problems with the current approach to norms and standards for ECD in South Africa. Real quality improvement happens when there

is a shared understanding of what quality is, and how quality can be achieved, as agreed by programme implementers, organisations and local communities.

There are many practical recommendations for quality programme design that can help to ensure that programmes are effective. Peeters (June 2008) identifies 8 areas where quality can be improved specifically in the design of programmes:

- Separate younger children from preschoolers
- Encourage teachers to develop their own creativity
- Encourage teachers to role-play and discuss
- Get children practising their use of language
- Ensure every child says something every day
- Combine story-telling with physical movement
- Be creative in finding things to use as toys
- Use materials that feature what children know

Quality intervention design should draw on both local and international research and experience to create programmes relevant and appropriate to various South African contexts.

### Quality assurance and programme fidelity

The Sobambisana project refers to several pilot projects, using innovative approaches to ECD, delivered by Sobambisana partner organisations. The experience of these partners suggests that, even when quality programmes are designed based on international research, the way programmes unfold sometimes reveals weaknesses in the design. Sometimes concerns about quality require programme teams to adapt the initial design to be more effective in implementation.

As part of the Sobambisana project, supported by Ilifa Labantwana, TREE began its Structured Playgroup programme in Indaka, Kwa-Zulu Natal, with a clear programme design. Play Facilitators (PFs) would be trained. These PFs would then capacitate and support parents and caregivers to facilitate Structured Playgroups. What they found was that caregivers and parents were a 'weak link' in this design in terms of the quality of the programmes, as well as monitoring and reporting. Relying on parents and caregivers, who did not necessarily have the capacity or a strong incentive to implement the programme as desired, made the model vulnerable to dilution and mutation by adding an extra 'top-down cascade' layer of training/implementation. This also presented a challenge in terms of reporting, because parents did not necessarily have the capacity or motivation to complete the detailed reporting necessary to monitor programme implementation and success.

"What this model presented was a sophisticated programme with equally sophisticated M+E tools relying on volunteer members of the community, the least capacitated of all the role players, to perform the ultimate facilitation and deployment in the field... In hind-sight, this is a step too far in reality, both in terms of the capacity of our community partners, but also, and more importantly, in terms of their overall needs and survival/livelihood strategies."

**TREE reports that:** Although parents and caregivers did not necessarily have the capacity to implement complicated structured programmes, they were enthusiastic and supportive of the idea of playgroups. Based on this natural development, TREE redesigned their model so that playgroups could exist locally on an ongoing basis and be supported by weekly visits from PFs, who would directly facilitate a structured programme with children, modelling interaction with children for caregivers at the same time. TREE is still able to intervene to help ensure that playgroups are appropriately sized. PFs are directly accountable to (and stipended by) TREE and are provided with on-going support and training, so the

intervention can maintain quality through PFs in direct contact with TREE. Monitoring and reporting could also be facilitated by trained PFs, improving data quality.

Ntataise's roll-out for the Sobambisana project was designed to include two elements involving parents: a Parent Support Programme for parents of children at ECD centres and parent attendance at playgroup sessions. Monitoring of implementation showed that parents did not attend the Parent Support Programme as regularly as the programme design required. When parents did attend regularly, their involvement in their children's ECD was more enthusiastic and supportive, suggesting that the intervention could have positive results, but many parents struggled to attend sessions because they were working. It also emerged that parents were more likely to attend playgroup sessions, or to send another family member if they were unable to attend. This development is likely to affect outcomes. Having this information allows the organisation to decide strategically what changes to make to improve or drop the less successful parent programme while strengthening the more successful one, so that they are able to increase impact and get the best return on investment.

### Quality assurance during implementation

Whether redesigning programmes or ensuring that programmes maintain fidelity to the original design, it is necessary to ensure that quality is monitored and supported during implementation. Quality assurance has to be built into the programme cycle.

Khululeka's Sobambisana project uses an example of this type of system (see Figure 1). They begin by ensuring that those recruited are willing (recruitment), equipped (training) and able (have sufficient opportunity and time) to roll out the programme. Once implementation begins, they focus on quality assurance using a cycle of activities to monitor and support quality. Quarterly programme implementation planning sessions with Community Development Practitioners provide an opportunity for detailed

activity planning. Programme mentors visit sites once a month to monitor and assess progress. Khululeka team members visit villages on a quarterly basis to monitor the activities of mentors. Once a quarter, reflection and review sessions are held. Formal information management systems are in place to support these quality assurance processes, including collecting M&E data, case studies and profiles.

**Governance:** Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead (2009) argue that governance is key to delivering quality programmes. As well as organisational oversight, it is useful (and sometimes crucial) for community members and parents to be part of the quality assurance process by holding service-providers and implementers accountable.

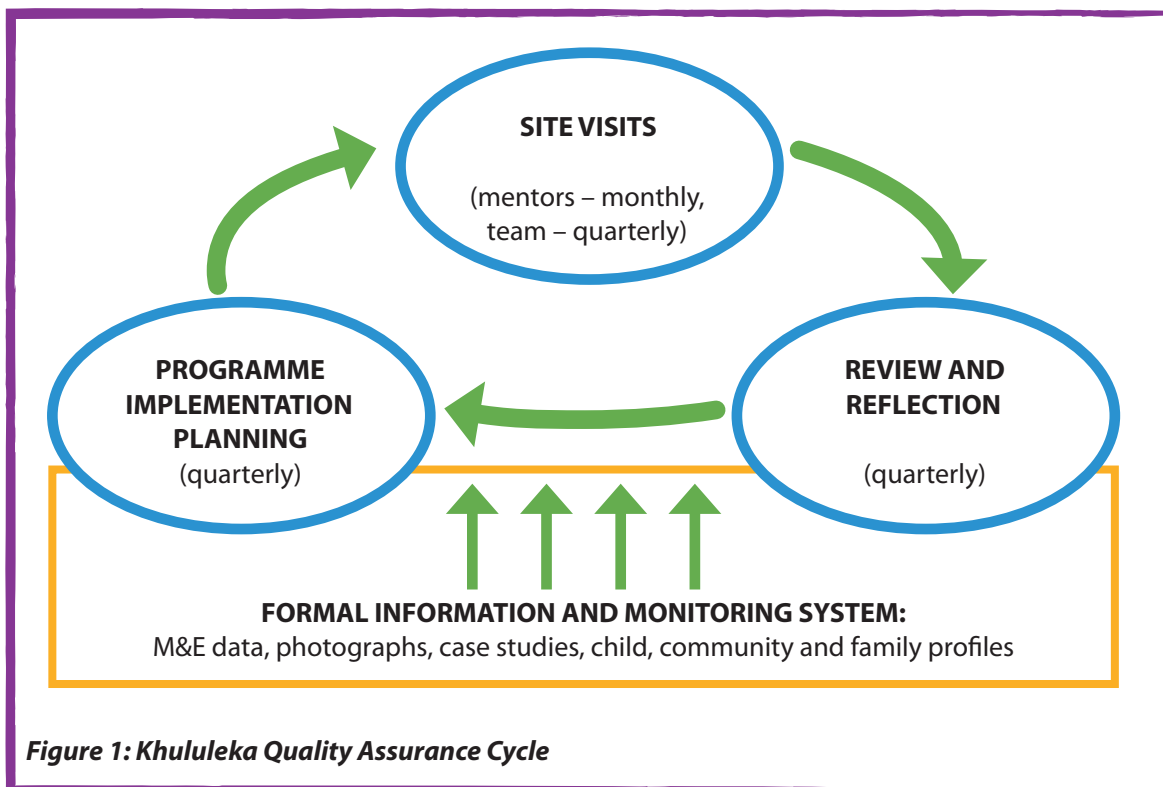
ELRU's project in Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape focuses strongly on community participation in ensuring ECD quality and coverage of service delivery. In implementing the Family and Community Motivator (FCM) programme, ELRU works closely with the existing Community Development Committee and other local stakeholders and institutions. FCMs are drawn

from the local community and capacitated by ELRU and then work with families to implement supportive child-care and early education practices. As a result of the programme, communities have become more concerned about early childhood development and are more empowered to advocate for quality ECD for their children.

The project implemented by CECD has a focus on developing centre governance and included an ECD Governing Body training programme to support sustainable community and parent involvement in working with and holding accountable ECD practitioners.

**The role of monitoring and evaluation**

Formal monitoring and evaluation systems are an important part of measuring quality and impact but they can also play a role in quality assurance during implementation. Some organisations do not carry out formal monitoring and evaluation activities. These organisations may run quality assurance activities, such as regular visits to sites and review meetings. Such activities are great



**Figure 1: Khululeka Quality Assurance Cycle**

for ensuring that implementation is according to previously agreed plans and that programme fidelity is maintained. They do not, however, allow effective programme adaption or objective measures of quality. More formal monitoring allows organisations to strategically target their time and energy to increase their impact and ensure that they offer the best possible intervention for children.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) information should be seen as part of the programme implementation cycle. It should be used by organisations and implementers to adapt their

programmes, to monitor quality and to guide decision-making and problem solving.

As the TREE example indicates, programme design, including M&E design, must be sensitive to the capacity and incentives of implementers. In designing monitoring and evaluation systems, organisations and programmes should find a balance between the ease of use of monitoring tools and the need for sufficient, accurate and reliable information to guide and support decision-making and advocacy. Using formal monitoring systems, however, should be an integral part of quality assurance.

#### References:

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**Ilifa Labantwana** (meaning 'children's heritage') is a four-year initiative to develop quality, scalable and sustainable Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes for disadvantaged children in South Africa. The project is funded and driven equally by three funders: The ELMA Foundation, the DG Murray Trust and the UBS Optimus Foundation. The project's aim is to support the South African government's ECD policies and plans, thereby increasing widespread access to quality ECD opportunities and building strong foundations for education for all of South Africa's children.

This 'Growth Sparks' is the sixth in a series aimed at sharing the experiences and lessons learned from Ilifa Labantwana.

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