

ECD Quality Toolkit Pilot Project 2016 Mediator Feedback Workshop 28-06-2016

Overview and purpose

Visits to the pilot sites have been concluded, and mediator reports have been submitted. Mediators came to a feedback workshop, in order to give them an opportunity to debrief, hear about each other's experiences, share their views and reflect on the process and tools used in the site visits.

Workshop Outcomes

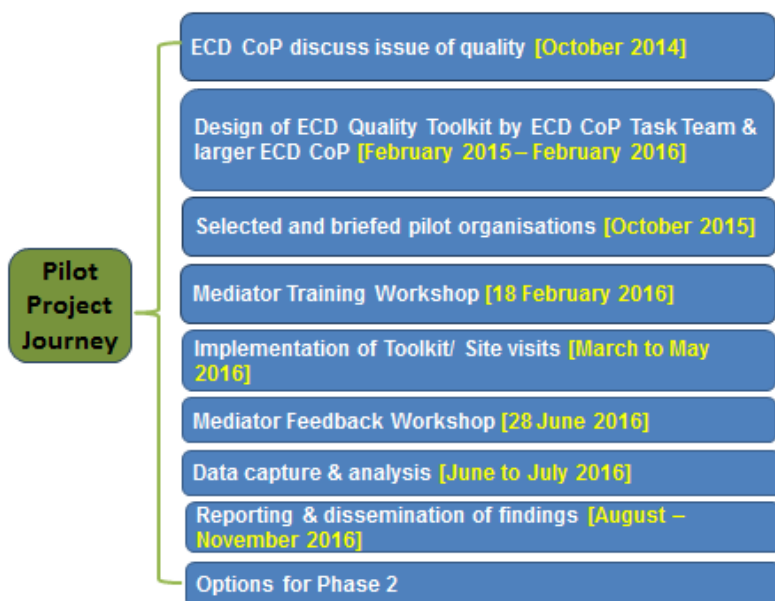
Mediators:

- Reflected on their own views about quality and compared them with those of practitioners in the pilot.
- Commented on the relationship between practitioners' views on quality and what you observed in the sites.
- Reflect and commented on the pilot processes and tools
- Shared lessons learned and ideas for the way forward with the Quality Toolkit.

At the start of the workshop mediators were asked to express their feelings on the site visits in one word or phrase. Here is a sample of comments which illustrate the range of experiences and findings:



Update on the pilot



[Link to the presentation for more detail.](#)

Mediators views on Quality: Data

The following themes were pulled out from the submitted reports:

Theme 1: The effect of context

- Cultural context plays a part in how quality in ECD is perceived (e.g. Christian ethos).
- Addressing community needs is a criterion for quality: if provision is not useful to a particular community, then it lacks quality.
- We sometimes underestimate the daily challenges faced by practitioners, and the limited opportunities they might have to improve the quality of delivery.
- Provisioning and funding affect quality. Poor and vulnerable sites need a lot of support, but unfortunately social workers often lack educational expertise and take a checklist approach to monitoring.

I learned more about how different environments impact on what a person thinks is quality – as in KZN jungle gyms are more sought after than running water – possibly because water from the river is perceived as good enough.

Theme 2: The gap between the words and the realities

- There is a need for more detailed knowledge about what quality is, and how quality translates into practical implementation.
- People sometimes know the jargon but not how it translates into actions in the classroom, or into functional systems.

What is written in the book does not always materialise on the ground.
They have a notion but do not practise it – what is spoken about is not
the same as what is put in place.

I learnt that much more awareness needs to be created around quality
and that functional systems need to be in place for implementation.

Theme 3: The role of quality assurance

- Everyone seems to understand the importance of quality, but not how to achieve it, measure it and improve on it.
- Not enough attention is paid to the role of quality assurance and its possible impact on holistic ECD interventions.
- Self-reflection could be part of a quality assurance process.

Theme 4: Different elements of quality

- Trainers as well as practitioners need to be taught how to reflect on quality.
- Quality involves managerial skills as well as teaching skills.
- Understanding quality takes note of the background of the practitioner, experience, knowledge, training, team work, values of the teacher, passion, resources available (including funding).
- Reflecting on what you do is a crucial aspect of quality.

I SAW the differences in quality, rather than just knowing about them.

Notes from activity: discussion in response to themes

Contexts

- We need to understand what we mean by context. Contexts are not only cultural, but include financial and resource contexts and the economic environment, as well as the 'support' context in which ECD is delivered (that is, how much or how little formal support from government departments is received in different geographical areas). Context can also refer to the nature of the practitioners in relation to the amount of experience and/or training they have received.

Context = physical location, funding & resources, socio-economic contexts, expertise & experience, attitudes

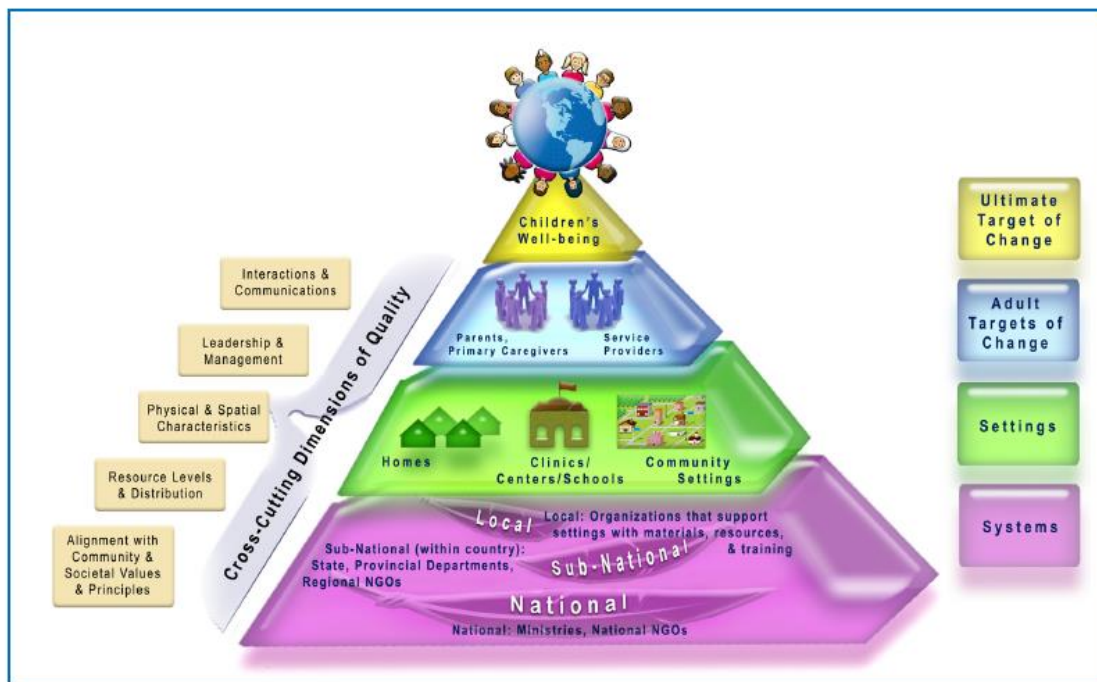
- Different contextual elements may play out differently in various combinations. For example, in rural areas there may be passion and commitment but little experience or formal expertise. Or, there may be a lack of resources which is mitigated by innovation and expertise.
- There is also a tension in this debate: as we know, views on quality may differ according to context (as illustrated by the comment about water above). Are there 'minimum standards' to which we wish to lead all practitioner regardless of context? Or do we consent to some features of practice because of perceptions within a specific context, even if they appear to go against perceived quality standards? In other words, where do we draw the line between context-specific standards and universal standards?

Roles and responsibilities at different stakeholder levels

Different structures and stakeholders (including government and RTOs) have different roles to play in defining quality as well as supporting quality, but this is not well understood.

- The roles of the different departments need to be clearly spelled out to principals and practitioners, as well as to private ECD centres. Practitioners are often uninformed about available support and don't know how to access it. This is partly because departments are under-resourced and don't communicate effectively. The roles of different state departments have a direct impact on quality.
- We reflected back on the origins of the pilot, and noted that we had originally wanted to develop different versions of the tool for different stakeholders. In the interests of feasibility we began with a focus on the practitioner. Lorayne Excel reminded us of a systemic view of quality as illustrated by the 'ecological model' (see figure and reference below) and noted that we can expand our perspectives in future work on quality.

Figure 2: Ecological Setting and Systems Levels and Cross-Cutting Quality Dimensions



- There are gaps in state support: for example, officials of the Department of Social Development are responsible for supporting and monitoring ECD sites but very often they don't understand the educational dimensions of ECD and the profiles of ECD practitioners. Both social workers and health practitioners need a better understanding of ECD. The Department of Basic Education has run workshops on the 0-4n curriculum, but some of this training illustrates a weak understanding of the curriculum.
- The way in which relevant people provide feedback (e.g. DSD representatives, training organisations, funders) is often inadequate or unhelpful.

Training issues

A number of issues around training relate to the quality debate.

- The biggest challenge for all in the ECD sector in training is moving from the informational to the transformational. In order to do this, we need to give practitioners practical tools to use so that their practice and implementation can change.
- Sometimes when practitioners are shown things rather than told about them they gain new insight. Training needs to more practice-based, and people need to be shown how to improvise.

- Practitioners exposed to different training providers sometimes get confused by different approaches.
- ECD training needs to be based on a different mindset to classroom-based training for Grade R and Grade 1.
- The Self-reflection tool can be a useful resource in training. RTOs should also use it for their own facilitator development. Trainers themselves need to understand their own knowledge gaps.
- We should not forget that language is frequently a barrier in training. Any training programme must ensure that the participants feel they can express their problems and ask questions.

Practitioner views on Quality

The following observations were made in both the submitted reports and the workshop discussion, in relation to the dimensions given in the tool.

Leadership and management

- Many managers were aware of their own knowledge gaps and the areas in which they need support (e.g. financial management).
- Some good interactions between principals and practitioners were observed. Surprisingly, there were no age-related tensions between relatively young principals and older practitioners.
- It was noted that the site visit process and discussions on quality helped generate better understanding of quality. Two anecdotal examples of schools who improved some of their resources and physical environments (e.g. by cleaning carpets, putting up posters and so on) were given.
- Examples of sites were given in which principals drew on people from the community to help, which in turn led to empowering of individuals by giving them entry into training and qualifications as practitioners.
- Monitoring and evaluation can have a good influence: those who welcomed it and understood its purpose showed a more in-depth understanding of quality than those who saw it as a compliance exercise. Understanding of M&E needs to be extended to self-evaluation and self-reflection.
- In general, the commitment shown by many principals and practitioners in ECD is impressive.

Policy issues

- There is little understanding of the role and purpose of policy at both national and local levels.
- Sometimes there is no clear distinction between external ECD policies and internal school policies. We need to check our own tool for clarity on this distinction.
- Many internal school policies are simply cut and paste off the internet and are not contextualised for the site or used appropriately.
- Centres may have policies at hand, but don't understand what they are for. This raises the question as to why policies not understood – government mechanisms (e.g. roadshows) for dissemination and mediation of national policies are perhaps not appropriate for the sector. Do RTOs have a role to play here?

Teaching & Learning

- Some practitioners showed very little knowledge of the curriculum. In some instances this was a terminology issue as the word 'curriculum' was unfamiliar. This suggests that we need to review our own terminology and use terms such as 'daily programme' or 'activities plan'.
- Very little learning activities seemed to take place at some of the home-based centres where 'day mothers' see themselves as caretakers rather than teachers. These practitioners go under the radar in terms of registration and other quality issues.

Environment

- Some practitioners use their environments well: for example, at one site children were taken to play at the community park.
- At the same time, however, there appears to be little knowledge of safety and maintenance checks around playground equipment.
- In one centre good play resources were not being used for fear of breakage.
- We need to mediate/explain the relationship between the four dimensions of the tool more clearly.
- In discussion on the environment, the tension between 'common standards' or 'contextual standards' came up again. What does equity mean in relation to entitlement to basics and minimum essentials?
- It needs to be noted that very little was said about the role of parents or caregivers in ECD.

Discussion of the pilot process and tools

It was agreed that we would not enter into detailed discussion on the different supporting tools. The following general comments are noted.

- Mediators needed more than half a day to familiarise themselves with the supporting documents and instruments.
- The language of the self-reflection tool needs to be simplified.
- Mediators often needed to change the sequence of events, either because of unforeseen circumstances or contextual demands.
- Practitioners welcomed the process, and were pleased to be consulted for their own views rather than 'checked' for compliance.
- Practitioners and principals felt that the four dimensions were useful.
- Most mediators felt they could have spent longer at the site and in conversation with practitioners.
- The importance of giving feedback to the sites was noted. Many principals and practitioners feel 'used' as they are frequently visited and never told what the outcome is.

Way forward

In relation to closing off the pilot, we will provide a template for follow up questions to sites; send out thank you letters to sites; and disseminate a report. We could ask partners to do follow up visits as well.

The aim of this session was to brainstorm ideas to take forward into future development of the ECD Quality Toolkit. How do we action any improved understanding of quality? The discussion was framed by the question:

“Does the Quality Reflection Tool need to be mediated, and is the way we did it in the pilot process the only way to do so?”

The short answer to the question is that 'it depends on the expertise (including literacy levels) of the practitioner'.

The tool can and should be used in different ways, including: self-reflection on your own; as a collaborative conversation tool, for example in staff meetings or internal professional development activities; in training contexts; as a basis for monitoring visits; as a consciousness-raising instrument.

We need to remember that the genesis of the pilot was the debate around quality standards in ECD. As a CoP we wanted to:

- work towards improving our own understanding of quality by being informed by practitioners' views and their contextual pressures; AND
- impart a better understanding of quality to the sector, by posing questions that will lead to an increased understanding of what makes up quality provision.

These are two different goals, and we still need to define what we mean by 'minimum standards' as differentiated from 'contextual standards'. The tool may help the sector not just to understand quality better but to implement it better.

Phase 2 Steps Forward

- Distribute the Quality Reflection Tool in different ways. However, we need to be clearer about what we distribute (the reflection tool? Any of the supporting process documents?) and why.
- Identify organisations to use the tool in different contexts; identify sites which will use it (e.g. with staff, in cluster meetings) and report back to us.
- Revise the Reflection Tool: simplify language and content / put it into bite size chunks/ link to practical examples/ use images, flash cards, posters and so on. Note that these options have to be considered in relation to cost and feasibility.
- We also need to capture our learnings for the academic community in order to put ECD on the map in all sectors.

In conclusion, it was noted that the follow-up process might help with next steps, as well as consultation with the CoP.