

The ISSA Pedagogical Standards: A Tool to Influence Quality in Early Childhood Programs

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Description of ISSA

ISSA is a membership organization that connects professionals and organizations working in the field of early childhood development and education. ISSA promotes equal access and care for all children, especially in the early years of their lives. Established in the Netherlands 1999, ISSA's network today stretches across the globe from Central and Eastern Europe to Central Asia, Asia, and the Americas. While ISSA offers general information sharing to all interested individuals and organizations, ISSA's core members are the 29 nongovernmental organizations located primarily in Central/Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which implement the Step by Step Program initiated by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in 1994. Within its network, ISSA supports a wide array of programs that collectively provide a comprehensive set of educational services and advocacy tools intended to influence policy reform for families and children, with a special focus on the years from birth through primary school.

ISSA's mission is to support professional communities and develop a strong civil society that influences and assists decision makers to:

- provide high quality care and educational services for all children from birth through primary school (birth through 10 years old), with a focus on the poorest and most disadvantaged
- ensure greater inclusion of family and community participation in children's development and learning
- ensure social inclusion and respect for diversity.

One of ISSA's four main goals is to promote high quality and professionalism in providing care and education for young children. It specifically works to do this through contributing to the development of common understanding among different stakeholders, especially in the ISSA region - parents, practitioners, decision makers - regarding the definition of quality ECD services across different age groups (with an increased emphasis on child's long-term outcomes and development of competences for life-long learning).

This has been accomplished through the *ISSA Pedagogical Standards* that were introduced in 2002. The *ISSA Pedagogical Standards* are based on the ISSA NGOs' experiences to introduce a child-centered approach in pre-schools and primary schools, mostly in the countries of the former Soviet Union, but also in a few locations in Latin America. The Standards have been used as both a professional development tool (training, mentoring and certification) and for advocacy purposes (influencing policy development and supporting policy implementation).

Description of the ISSA Pedagogical Standards

The *ISSA Pedagogical Standards* were first published in 2001 as a network-developed tool that defined quality in teaching practices and the classroom environment and captured the changes that had occurred in the region since 1994 when the Step by Step Program, an initiative to promote democratic principles in early childhood development and education, was launched. The Program was built on belief that each child has the right to receive maximum support for the development of his or her full potential, and this work should be done in partnership and close cooperation with families, communities, and professionals.

The ISSA Pedagogical Standards were developed by Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) professionals from ISSA member organizations with input from experts around the world. The Standards were intended to help practitioners, preschool, and primary teachers improve their everyday performance through the principles of learner-centered, interactive pedagogy, development of life-long learning skills, and cooperation with families and communities. The Standards promoted the idea that processes—how programs and relationships are structured and implemented—are as important as outcomes, that teacher preparation and professional development should better connect theory and practice, and that policies should be developed in a way that promotes teachers' autonomy in decision making on professional issues, taking into account the needs of children, their families, and the community.

The Standards were widely shared with various stakeholders in the ISSA region and, in several cases, served as a resource for the development of national educational framework documents, teacher training programs, etc. Discussion about quality and the role of the teacher empowered parents to appreciate the work of teachers and to be more actively involved in their children's learning. Developed by early childhood experts from countries transitioning to democracy, the Standards offered a unique perspective on the connections between early childhood education and open society, providing bases for revisiting concepts and improving practices according to the needs of individuals and communities. The standards and the set of supporting materials provided effective tools to implement diverse forms of professional development, including self-assessment, mentoring, training, and certification as recognition of exemplary practice.

The original ISSA Pedagogical Standards consisted of six standards with several indicators under each Standard: Individualization, Learning Environment, Family Participation, Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning, Planning and Assessment and Professional Development. These standards reflected ISSA's core values and practices since the very beginning of implementing the Step by Step program in the region. In 2005, an additional area was added: a standard on social inclusion. This new standard emphasized the need to build quality practice on respect for diversity and challenged teachers to reflect in their own everyday work as well as to help children respect diversity and to develop skills to combat discrimination when they encounter it.

After the Standards were launched, ISSA's member organizations – the NGOs implementing the Step by Step Program used the Standards in different ways, depending on their capacity, expertise, national context, and needs. Over the years, training programs and implementation strategies have been continuously developed throughout the network to support the implementation of the Standards as a way to promote quality pedagogy. Regional events to establish and maintain quality reliability (a common understanding of quality) among the experts within the ISSA network based on the Standards added international value to the efforts of the national NGOs and promoted a new way of professional development. The best professionals were trained to become mentors to assist teachers improve their performance based on the ISSA Pedagogical Standards. Outstanding performance was rewarded with an ISSA Certificate of Teaching Excellence – international recognition of quality practice. A number of other resources were published and distributed in the ISSA network as well, such as a *Mentoring Guide* with examples of how to support teachers of different experience levels and *Making Standards Come Alive*, a teacher self-assessment tool.

Teachers involved in the process became more sensitive and reflective practitioners, and their observation and communication skills, self-esteem, and reputation were all improved.

Study on the Standards

In 2009, ISSA embarked on a study to examine the role of the standards as they were implemented through certification, mentoring, training for staff development, and as part of the broader teaching quality initiative within the association. The methodology consisted of collecting both *quantitative* and *qualitative* data from each of the ISSA NGOs and synthesizing findings into a report that describes the impact of the standards on ECDE practice and policy across the Network. Four research questions were addressed:

1. How were the ISSA Pedagogical Standards used to promote quality early care and education through training for professional development, mentoring and certification?
2. What were the barriers and enabling factors to using the standards to influence teaching and program ECED quality?
3. How were the ISSA pedagogical standards used to promote systems of quality and to influence broader education practice and policy in schools, communities and national institutions?
4. What were the barriers and enabling factors to using the standards as an advocacy and policy tool?

Results of the Study

Influence on Individual Teachers

Outcomes

NGO core staff were asked to identify what standards-based activities had the greatest impact on individual quality, what outcomes did they see in quality practices and what were the greatest challenges to quality improvement at the individual level. Results are listed in the box to the right and below.

Introducing and using standards for quality improvement through training, mentoring and certification has had the following impact on the individual practice of teachers, mentors and certifiers:

- *Improved teaching skills.* Through mentoring, certification and the use of the standards as a self assessment tool, the quality of teachers' instructional practices has improved. Teachers pay more attention to student progress, monitoring and assessment through the use of the portfolio. They have improved their skills in self assessment and in creating and implementing new teaching strategies
- *Increased efficacy.* Teachers are more empowered to address their personal growth. They have started to plan their own professional development both in terms of general topics but also in terms of identifying areas of need. They see themselves as successful teachers and have more self confidence. *Improved teacher support skills.*
- Through a number of strategies, mentors have acquired a deep understanding of the standards and their application to daily practice and as a result are highly effective in supporting teachers.
- *Career development and status.* Teachers who have been certified achieve a level of prestige and "hire-ability." In addition, school directors and principals and national teacher certification agencies recognize the quality of those teachers who have received ISSA certification through additional professional development points.

Challenges

Following are the most commonly cited challenges to impacting individual practice:

- *Applying standards to practice.* This is the most frequently identified challenge. Teachers and mentors both have difficulty translating the standards into daily practice. The question for further investigation is whether this difficulty is due to a basic misalignment between national

curricula, standards and expectations for teachers or due to a need for better and more targeted teacher training and ongoing support to put standards into daily practice.

- *Balancing quality and quantity.* Providing standards training to large numbers of teachers without providing adequate follow-up for mentoring and technical assistance compromised the level of quality with which the standards were being implemented in teachers' classrooms
- *Time and opportunity.* Most mentors and certifiers have other daily responsibilities and it is often difficult for them to balance these other expectations and time commitments with time to work with teachers (to devote enough time to visiting classrooms and meeting with teachers individually)
- *School culture/understanding and acceptance.* Without an understanding of how standards can improve teaching quality many school leaders are not supportive. In some schools teachers are not supported by their colleagues who again do not recognize the value of using standards in daily instruction and/or may not be ready to make changes in their own teaching style.
- *Recognition/national context.* In countries where certification or the standards were not recognized, it was difficult to motivate teachers to participate or schools/municipalities to support certification
- *Resources.* Certification and mentoring are expensive and resources for that as well as training is difficult to acquire without outside support from donors
- *Classroom conditions.* In many cases where there are 50 or more students in a classroom, teachers struggle with being able to effectively implement the standards in practice. Rigid text books and lack of teaching materials were also cited as barriers.
- *Lack of public understanding* about what constitutes quality education contributed to the attitude among many school and civic leaders who could not recognize the value of training teachers to use the standards or of using the standards as a teacher assessment tool.

Question: What had the biggest impact on quality:*

Standards training and self assessment	14
Working with a mentor	14
Being a mentor	9
Certification	4
Learning Community	14
Other:	1
Portfolio development	

*Number of times rated

Influence on schools and communities

Outcomes

Implementing the standards in some cases led to influencing the school community and culture as well as building support from parents and other stakeholders across the community at large. The degree of influence is largely dependent on the scale of standards implementation in a school — in some cases just one or two teachers were using the standards in their classrooms and in other schools, many teachers were engaged. The standards had the following impact on schools and communities:

- *Increased peer support.* A number of strategies were put in place to support teachers at the school site. These efforts resulted in more team work among teachers and teachers with more experience helping other, less experienced teachers – thus expanding the quality of teaching practices.
- *School leaders created a "culture" of quality.* When school directors and principals were trained to conduct classroom observations and plan professional development opportunities based on the standards, the use of standards to increase quality became embedded in day to day school operations.
- *Community involvement.* When standards-based quality initiatives were being implemented in schools, a number of programs involved community level leadership in planning and implementing the process. This in turn led to a number of municipalities and local education authorities assuming some or all of the costs.

- *More teachers seeking certification.* In many cases when a teacher in a school became certified, his/her colleagues would also choose to begin the certification process
- *Celebration and shared “ownership” of the certification process.* Parents, teacher assistants and other school-based personnel involved with teachers as they went through the certification process became more aware of the importance of using standards to improve practice. In some instances, support from others was formally recognized with a letter of appreciation at the time teachers received their certificates

Challenges

Following are some of the more common challenges to influencing school culture and communities.

- *Lack of understanding of the standards as a quality improvement tool.* School and local education leaders often did not understand standards and their potential to increase teacher quality.
- *Parent involvement.* Some programs report difficulty in getting parents to be more engaged in their child’s learning.

Influence on education policy and practice

Outcomes

Influence on national policy and practice is a work in progress. To date the major outcomes for introducing standards into policy include:

- Standards have influenced a large number of new policy decisions and documents across the ISSA network including new curricula, teacher standards and guidelines for quality improvement.
- Almost all the NGO’s have established working relationships with Ministries of Education and other pertinent national agencies and have influenced the ongoing and emerging thinking and direction new policy is taking.

Challenges

- *Political instability.* Frequent changes in national leadership have slowed movement on a number of new education policy initiatives.
- *Complex policy structures.* In many countries the education policy system is highly complex and decentralized leading to a number of different approaches and guidelines across agencies and regions. In other countries, the process for acquiring recognition of training and services is complicated and takes time.
- *Understanding and defining quality.* A number of programs have indicated that there is no common national definition or consensus on what constitutes quality teaching.
- *Misalignment.* In some cases the ISSA standards do not align with national standards or other education system requirements and guidelines.

The Revised ISSA Pedagogical Standards

Before this study was even commissioned, ISSA in 2006 embarked on a process to revise and update the ISSA Pedagogical Standards. It was determined that there was a need to:

- Make even more explicit ISSA’s belief in equal opportunities and quality education
- Incorporate latest findings from relevant research in the field
- Improve the use of Standards as a professional development tool
- Promote more actively the Standards as a tool to advocate for quality pedagogy, and
- Use Standards as a platform to engage in discussions with different stakeholders nationally and locally (educational authorities, families, media etc.) about the definition of quality in ECDE and its implementation

Over the last couple of years, a Task Force consisting of ISSA representatives has been working on the revision process in consultation other international experts on quality pedagogy from different

parts of the world. Drafts have been discussed during the meetings of large groups of experts from the ISSA network as well as at ISSA Council Meetings to ensure that they reflect common beliefs and that they are relevant to the needs of the region.

It is envisaged that the revised ISSA Pedagogical Standards, *Competent Teachers of the 21st Century: ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy*, will serve as the foundation for all of ISSA's program and advocacy work in quality early childhood care, development and education. In the context of ISSA's strategy framework, the Standards are at the core of the work carried out to pursue strategic goals related to equity, access, quality, parental support and community participation.

The revised document now consists of seven focus areas:

1. Interactions
2. Family and Community
3. Inclusion, Diversity, and the values of Democracy
4. Assessment and Planning
5. Teaching strategies
6. Learning Environment
7. Professional Development

Under each focus area there are standards (20 total versus 7 in the previous document) and 85 indicators. The revised document also based on the principles manifested in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), as well as several other major international documents including:

- The OECD Starting Strong reports that describe the research basis and examine the conceptual, social, economic, and cultural factors that influence early childhood policy.
- *The Council of Europe program "Building a Europe for and with Children"* which aims to support the implementation of international standards in the field of children's rights by all Council of Europe member states and, in particular, promotes the implementation of the CRC.
- The 2007 *Children in Europe's* ten principles as the basis for a European approach to early years services, expressing both an agreed platform and challenges for the sector.

Conclusion

Given the extensive differences of social, political and economic background and subsequent changes that have occurred across countries in the ISSA network over the past decade, each NGO had a unique story to tell – with some countries reporting impact across all three levels of implementation and others describing deep and intensive work at just one or two levels. The political climate for NGO development and the culture of civil participation was also a factor that influenced the ability of the NGO's to promote significant changes in education and civil society. By looking across and within countries a comprehensive and contextualized overview of practices and impacts across the entire network emerged which was that the ISSA Pedagogical Standards reflected what practitioners should do to support children's development and learning and also suggested what communities and decision-makers should do in order to support professionals in their very important work. The ISSA standards and the work that has been accomplished since they were introduced are well positioned to inform the work within the countries of the ISSA NGOs and across all countries to create policy and practice needed now.

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