

Development of External Educational Quality Assurance to Reduce Educational Inequality and Address Developmental and Learning Issues in Early Childhood Development Centers

Associate Professor Dr. Rungchatchadaporn Vehachart

Email: drrungtsu@gmail.com

Faculty of Education, Thaksin University

Abstract:

This academic article highlights the critical importance of early childhood education as a foundational stage for children's development, emphasizing its impact on brain growth, emotional well-being, social skills, and future success. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional learning environments, particularly for kindergarten students, leading to significant developmental regression due to the lack of play-based, interactive experiences. The Office of the Basic Education Commission recognizes the urgency of assessing early childhood readiness and the need for effective evaluation tools. The shift to online and hybrid learning has further complicated developmental progress, necessitating collaborative efforts among stakeholders—school administrators, teachers, educational supervisors, and parents—to develop and implement strategies that address these challenges. By focusing on holistic development, these strategies aim to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic and enhance equal learning opportunities and academic achievement outcomes for young children.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education Centers, Play-Based Learning, Holistic Development, Interactive Experiences, Assessment Tools

Introduction

The National Education Act defines several levels of education, with early childhood education being a foundational stage that prepares children for learning. While higher education is often perceived as the most critical level, in reality, early childhood education is of utmost importance. This stage is crucial for the development of a child's brain, emotions, mental health, social skills, and intelligence, all of which are susceptible to significant change if appropriately stimulated. Proper early childhood education can pave the way for future success in careers and employment. Various research studies from different organizations support this notion, leading to the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Act. Furthermore, the constitution also emphasizes the significance of this educational level in developing individuals' potential for future growth.

At every level, from the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) to regional and school levels, there are responsible agencies overseeing this aspect of education. However, the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years has hindered opportunities for students, including those in kindergarten who were preparing to enter first grade. These children had to continue their kindergarten education at home, missing out on essential in-person learning experiences. Early childhood learning is fundamentally based on play, which fosters development in physical, emotional, mental, social, and intellectual areas. Without attending school, it becomes challenging to assess a child's readiness across these domains. The question arises: how can we

measure and evaluate this readiness? What tools should be used, and who should conduct these evaluations?

Currently, the Office of the Basic Education Commission is deeply concerned about this issue. The situation can be likened to a doctor diagnosing a patient—early childhood students are akin to patients who will be learning on-site with us. Just as a doctor would conduct various tests to diagnose a patient, we need to assess the readiness of early childhood students. The necessity of testing their physical and cognitive readiness becomes paramount. However, the challenge lies in determining the appropriate tools for these assessments and how to interpret the results. It is crucial to have discussions and collaborative planning to establish policies, procedures, measures, and tools, as well as to identify the personnel who will implement these assessments nationwide. This is the first step that we must take together.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted every aspect of life, including education. Most educational institutions were unable to operate normally, leading to a shift in learning methods from traditional classroom settings to online, on-hand, on-air, or hybrid models. Students adapted to learning through worksheets, assignments, or modern technological tools. While these methods addressed the immediate challenges faced by teachers and students, they also resulted in missed opportunities for normal learning experiences. Students lost the chance to learn together, engage in group work, exchange ideas, and interact with teachers and peers. This lack of interaction and collaboration hindered learning processes that align with psychological principles of education and prevented students from reaching their full potential.

This issue is particularly concerning for early childhood students, who learn primarily through play, hands-on activities, and interaction with teachers, peers, and the environment. Experiential learning and self-directed exploration, with teachers acting as facilitators, are crucial at this developmental stage. The inability of schools to operate normally or the shift in learning experiences has not only affected educational outcomes but also hindered the overall development of young children. The absence of play-based learning, hands-on activities, or consistent educational experiences that align with the interests and developmental needs of children has led to a decline in their developmental capabilities and potential, known as developmental and learning regression.

Evaluation of developmental milestones and observations of early childhood behavior by teachers and related stakeholders have revealed that many young children are exhibiting behaviors or abilities that do not align with their age. This regression may be due to inequalities in family readiness, lack of appropriate developmental support, or the loss of proper learning opportunities caused by the pandemic. The effects of this developmental regression are seen across all areas—physical, emotional, mental, social, and intellectual. For instance, children may exhibit delayed growth, weakened motor skills, reduced ability to perform daily tasks independently, impaired language communication, difficulty in playing and working with others, and challenges in thinking and problem-solving.

Given the urgency of this issue, it is imperative that all relevant stakeholders—including school administrators, teachers, educational supervisors, and parents—collaborate to plan and implement appropriate strategies for addressing developmental and learning regression in early

childhood students. These efforts should aim to enhance children's development and learning outcomes.

Research Focus:

This study aims to explore the management of education and the development of quality management systems to address the developmental and learning issues in early childhood centers in the post-COVID-19 era. It is essential to investigate the quality of learning and teaching methods, as well as to identify the components, indicators, and criteria for developing management systems in accordance with standard guidelines. The study will consider the following three aspects based on the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS) criteria:

- 1. Management of Early Childhood Development Centers:** This includes planning for each academic year, implementing the planned activities, evaluating the success of the implementation, using the evaluation results to make improvements for the following academic year, and presenting the management outcomes to stakeholders.
- 2. Teachers/Caregivers:** Teachers and caregivers play a crucial role in providing care and creating learning experiences through play to foster the development of young children.
- 3. Quality of Early Childhood Education:** This includes setting quality goals for early childhood education, systematically developing these quality aspects according to the developmental goals, ensuring children achieve age-appropriate developmental milestones, using the assessment results to further improve the developmental outcomes, and presenting the evaluation results to those involved in the development and learning processes. The research is based on the perspective of "Early Childhood Children and the Impact of Developmental Regression" for the academic year 2022, with the aim of using the findings to improve the quality management of early childhood centers in the post-COVID-19 era.

Research Objectives:

1. To study the current situation and challenges related to the development and learning of early childhood development centers.
2. To examine the components, indicators, and quality management criteria of early childhood development centers in the post-COVID-19 era.

Scope of the Research:

A. Variable Scope:

1. **Personnel Data:** Includes administrators, teachers or caregivers, and support staff.
2. **Early Childhood Development Centers:** Includes daycare centers, nurseries, early childhood development centers, and kindergartens.
3. **Educational Institutions Conducting Actual Teaching in the Evaluated Academic Year:** Includes institutions under the Ministry of Interior, local administrative organizations,

the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Department of Children and Youth, the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Education, the Office of the Basic Education Commission, and the Office of the Private Education Commission.

B. Content Scope: Follows the SAR (Self-Assessment Report) guidelines based on the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS) standards under the COVID-19 situation (SAR Evaluation Report: COVID-19 Early Childhood Development Center SAR CO - 03 - 1, CO - 04

The content scope includes the following three aspects:

1. Management of Early Childhood Development Centers:

- 1.1 Annual planning for each academic year.
- 1.2 Implementation of the operational plan.
- 1.3 Evaluation of the success of the implementation according to the plan.
- 1.4 Utilizing the evaluation results for improvements in the following academic year.
- 1.5 Presenting the management outcomes of the institution to stakeholders.

2. Teachers/Caregivers:

- 2.1 Teachers or caregivers plan annual learning experiences for all learning units across all grade levels.
- 2.2 Teachers or caregivers implement the planned learning experiences using media, information technology, and learning resources that support learning.
- 2.3 Systematic evaluation of the implementation of learning experiences.
- 2.4 Utilizing the evaluation results to systematically improve the learning experiences provided by teachers or caregivers.
- 2.5 Facilitating knowledge exchange and providing feedback for improving the organization of learning experiences.

3. Quality of Early Childhood Education:

- 3.1 Identifying quality goals for early childhood education.
- 3.2 Systematically developing the quality of early childhood education according to developmental goals.
- 3.3 Achieving age-appropriate development according to early childhood development goals.
- 3.4 Utilizing the results of early childhood quality assessments to enhance age-appropriate development.
- 3.5 Presenting the results of early childhood quality assessments to relevant stakeholders.

Definition of Terms Used in the Research:

- 1. Quality of Educational Institutions:** Refers to the outcomes of educational management within an institution aimed at developing students to achieve the desired qualities and characteristics as defined by the curriculum's objectives. This quality is measured through external quality assessments conducted by the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Public Organization), which categorizes quality into levels such as excellent, good, fair, needs improvement, and urgent improvement. The development of the institution's quality refers to the change in the quality level of the educational institution.

- 2. Development of Quality Management Systems:** Refers to the methods or processes used to develop a management system in accordance with the standard criteria, specifically following the SAR guidelines based on NIETS standards across three aspects:

2.1 Management of Early Childhood Development Centers: Involves planning annual operations, implementing these plans, evaluating the success of the implementation, using the evaluation results to make improvements in the following academic year, and presenting the management outcomes to stakeholders.

2.2 Teachers/Caregivers: Refers to the planning and organizing of learning experiences and play to develop early childhood. This includes planning annual learning experiences for all units and grade levels, using media, information technology, and learning resources that support learning, systematically evaluating the learning experiences, and using evaluation results to systematically improve the learning experiences.

2.3 Quality of Early Childhood Education: Refers to setting quality goals, systematically developing early childhood quality according to these goals, achieving age-appropriate development, and using the results of quality assessments to enhance early childhood development.

- 3. Development and Learning of Early Childhood Development Centers in the Post-COVID-19 Era:** Refers to the perspective on "early childhood and the impact of regression" during the 2022 academic year.
- 4. Components of Educational Quality:** Refers to the framework of indicators related to the development of quality management systems to address the developmental and learning challenges faced by early childhood development centers in the post-COVID-19 era.
- 5. Educational Quality Indicators:** Refers to indicators that highlight the development of quality management systems to address the developmental and learning challenges in early childhood development centers in the post-COVID-19 era. The process includes assessing developmental regression and learning through activities aimed at rehabilitation, correction, or promotion of the desired developmental states of early childhood. Monitoring involves tracking progress to determine whether children meet developmental goals, whether regression is reduced, and whether interventions are successful.
- 6. Educational Quality Criteria:** Refers to detailed explanations of indicators used to develop quality management systems to address developmental and learning challenges in early childhood development centers in the post-COVID-19 era. This involves assigning responsibility for monitoring and evaluation, incorporating it into the continuous and context-specific learning activities organized by early childhood teachers, designing and planning a systematic monitoring process, conducting evaluations, and using data to inform individual child development and collaboration with parents and stakeholders.

7. **Early Childhood Development Center:** Refers to institutions such as childcare centers, early childhood development centers, early intervention centers for children with disabilities or special needs, daycare centers, and shelters under the Child Protection Act. These centers include schools, learning centers, educational institutions, government or private organizations, and religious institutions that aim to provide education for early childhood.
8. **National Early Childhood Development Center Standards:** Refers to the national standard adopted by the Cabinet on May 3, 2011, replacing the National Childcare Center Standard. These standards provide a unified guideline for all government and private early childhood development centers nationwide, used for performance evaluation, quality enhancement, and as an internal quality assurance tool to support evaluations by superiors and external assessments by the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Public Organization).

Research Methodology:

This research employs a multi-method approach using the Exploratory Sequential Design, beginning with qualitative research, followed by quantitative research, and concluding with another round of qualitative research. The research is conducted in two main phases:

Phase 1: Study of the Current Situation and Issues in the Development and Learning of Early Childhood Development Centers

Data Collection Process or Methods:

Informants:

1. Scholars/Researchers in early childhood education programs at the university level.
2. Scholars/Researchers in early childhood education management.
3. Policymakers responsible for the quality assurance of early childhood development centers.
4. Directors of the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Public Organization).

Research Tools:

Structured interviews focusing on the development of quality management systems in early childhood development centers to address developmental and learning issues.

Data Collection Methods:

1. Study of Theoretical Frameworks: Analyze and synthesize relevant documents, theories, and concepts related to the development of quality management systems aimed at resolving developmental and learning issues in early childhood development centers post-COVID-19. This step is used to establish the initial concepts for developing such systems.
2. Expert Interviews: Conduct structured interviews with experts to establish the primary conceptual framework for the research. This is done using qualitative methods.

Data Analysis:

Qualitative analysis is conducted using content analysis. The focus is on studying the components, indicators, and quality management criteria for early childhood development centers in the post-COVID-19 era.

Phase 2: Study of the Components, Indicators, and Quality Management Criteria of Early Childhood Development Centers

Informants:

1. Scholars/Researchers in early childhood education programs at the university level.
2. Scholars/Researchers in early childhood education management.
3. Policymakers responsible for educational quality assurance.
4. Director and executive of the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Public Organization).
5. Directors of early childhood development centers.
6. Early childhood education supervisors.
7. Early childhood teachers.

Research Findings:

The following details includes the findings of the current situation and issues in development and learning of Early Childhood Development Centers. The evaluation of standards is categorized by the type of educational institution: early childhood, basic education, vocational education, and higher education. According to the National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) and its amendments, one of the key principles is the establishment of educational standards and a quality assurance system for all levels and types of education. The Ministry of Education is responsible for overseeing education at all levels, setting policies, plans, and educational standards, and ensuring that internal quality assurance systems are continuously implemented by the responsible agencies and educational institutions. The components, indicators, and criteria for educational quality in early childhood development centers can be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- a.) Establishing clear educational standards at each level.
- b.) Ensuring a continuous internal quality assurance system.
- c.) Reporting annually to relevant authorities and disclosing information to the public to facilitate the development of educational quality standards and support external quality assurance.

Table 1: Indicators and Evaluation Criteria for ONESQA's Fourth Round

Elements	Indicators
1. Student Quality	Indicator 1: Students are good individuals. Indicator 2: Students have knowledge and skills according to the curriculum. Indicator 3: Students have critical thinking abilities. Indicator 4: Students possess life skills.

Elements	Indicators
2. Teacher/Instructor Quality	Indicator 5: Teachers/instructors are good individuals with capabilities. Indicator 6: Teachers/instructors create quality classrooms/learning environments. Indicator 7: Teachers/instructors produce work that is beneficial. Indicator 8: Teachers/instructors receive ongoing knowledge and experience enhancement.
3. School Management and Governance (20 Points)	Indicator 9: The operation of the school board. Indicator 10: The operation of the school director. Indicator 11: Risk management. Indicator 12: Development of support staff.
4. Community/Social Relations	Indicator 13: Cooperation that positively impacts the community/society. Indicator 14: Cooperation with the community/society that benefits the school.
5. Promotion of Arts and Culture	Indicator 15: Promotion and support of arts and culture. Indicator 16: Development of aesthetics.
6. Identity/Uniqueness	Indicator 17: Student identity. Indicator 18: School uniqueness.
7. Promotion Measures	Indicator 19: Promotion measures. Indicator 20: External promotion measures (outside the school).

Results from the Study on Components, Indicators, and Quality Management Criteria for Early Childhood Development Centers are as follows:

Perspective of School Administrators:

In the academic year 2022, preparations were made for children one week before the start of the school term to ensure they felt confident and comfortable entering the classroom. However, it was observed that children were not ready and experienced developmental regression in all four areas, such as difficulty in self-help, and challenges in adapting and playing with peers. The school planned to assess the situation by adjusting the initial experience-based activity plan for kindergarten children, allowing more time for adjustment than in previous years. Collaboration with parents was also emphasized to restore the developmental regression and learning delays.

Perspective of Teachers:

In the academic year 2022, teachers prepared for on-site learning by setting up the environment, arranging materials and equipment, and preparing learning experiences. Observations of behavior and development in early childhood children revealed that children in kindergarten years 2 and 3 did not meet the desired developmental standards. This indicated developmental and learning regression in various areas, including physical development (e.g., gross and fine motor skills), emotional and psychological development (e.g., task completion), social development (e.g., working with others, patience, manners), and cognitive development, particularly in language and thinking skills. Therefore, teachers adopted the following approaches to help develop the children:

- 1) Holding meetings with parents to explain the issues and collaborate on promoting and developing the children between home and school.
- 2) Organizing experiences and learning activities that allow children to engage hands-on with a variety of materials.
- 3) Using engaging materials in learning experiences, such as stories, educational games, and songs, to enhance learning.

Perspective of Parents:

Parents were pleased that the school could open for on-site learning in this academic year. In the past, learning activities were conducted at home, which led to children's lack of readiness in many areas. Parents expressed a desire for the school to help develop the missing skills, such as diverse learning content, social skills, peer interaction, discipline, and healthy eating habits. They expected that attending school would improve their children's development.

Monitoring and Evaluating Developmental and Learning Regression:

Teachers gathered data from experiences or activities to restore, correct, or promote the development of children experiencing regression in specific areas or desired aspects. Monitoring and evaluation aimed to track the progress of activities designed to restore developmental and learning regression, ensuring that children met the developmental goals, indicating readiness or reduced regression. The process may involve the following steps:

1. Assigning responsible personnel for monitoring and evaluation, including early childhood teachers, the head of early childhood education, or school administrators, who must work with parents or those involved with early childhood children.
2. Integrating monitoring and evaluation into the experience/activity planning of teachers, ensuring continuity and alignment with the actual conditions of early childhood children.
3. Designing and planning a systematic approach for monitoring and evaluating developmental and learning regression:
 - 3.1. Identifying which behaviors of the children have regressed.
 - 3.2. Determining the methods and tools for monitoring and evaluation.
 - 3.3. Establishing a timeline or calendar for the monitoring and evaluation activities.
4. Conduct monitoring, evaluation, or integration of the school's internal supervision system.
5. Analyze the data and summarize the results of the monitoring and evaluation of individual early childhood children to use the information for improving the arrangement of experiences or developing the children individually, and to coordinate with parents and those involved.
6. If early childhood teachers successfully conduct experiences or activities to restore and correct developmental and learning regression, the school should encourage the teachers to prepare reports on their successful practices for dissemination. In cases where problems

arise, the school may use the Professional Learning Community (PLC) process to address the issues.

7. For early childhood children showing signs of developmental and learning regression beyond the teacher's ability to restore or correct, the teacher should refer the child to relevant individuals with expertise either within or outside the school to address the issue.

Environment Arrangement Guidelines:

1. The classroom should be systematically and reasonably divided into different areas with a warm, home-like atmosphere.
2. Each area should have sufficient space.
3. The classroom should be safe, well-maintained, and visually appealing.
4. Materials and equipment should be systematically arranged so that children can easily access and put them away.
5. The materials and equipment that should be available in the classroom include real objects, materials for sensory exploration, materials for role-play, and materials for creating 2D and 3D works. The equipment should be diverse to cater to individual differences and experiences.
6. Various materials and equipment should be provided to allow children the opportunity to work and develop in various areas, such as language development, expression of thoughts, classification and sequencing, dimensions, numbers, space, time, movement, and social-emotional development.

Play Area Arrangement:

1. Play areas should be arranged to allow for movement, considering safety and proper maintenance. For example, the block area and house area should be close together, the art area should be near the sink or restroom, and the toy area and book area should be far from noisy areas or outdoor play spaces near the classroom.
2. The space should be adaptable to the interests of the children. For example:
 - i. Block Area: Materials for building, separating, and assembling, as well as materials for pretend play and photographs, should be provided.
 - ii. House Area: Materials for cooking and dining, pretend play and imitation materials, household items reflecting children's lives, real cooking equipment (under adult supervision), photos, and menus should be provided.
 - iii. Art Area: Paper, colouring and printing materials, materials for tying, attaching, securing, materials for creating surfaces and models, materials for collage, and materials for drawing and cutting should be provided.
 - iv. Toy Area: Materials for sorting and small-scale construction, materials for separating and assembling, pretend play materials, and games should be provided.
 - v. Book and Writing Area: A variety of books, magazines, storytelling materials, and writing materials should be provided.
 - vi. "Important Experiences with Active Learning Activities using Loose Parts" by Associate Professor Dr. Patcharee Poyothin (https://youtu.be/s_5DR53e2yA)

Research Recommendations:

1. Developing a quality management system for early childhood development centers across all regions to address developmental and learning issues in the post-COVID-19 era, including the North, Northeast, Central (including Bangkok), and South.
2. Recommendations to the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) for the development of a quality management system for early childhood development centers to address developmental and learning issues in the post-COVID-19 era.
3. Relevant agencies should develop a quality management system for early childhood development centers to address developmental and learning issues in the post-COVID-19 era.
4. The outcome of driving the development of a quality management system for early childhood development centers should align with the country's future development.

References

- Davis, P. (1972). *The American heritage dictionary of the English language*. New York: American Heritage Publishing.
- Darunsilp, M. (2014). *Development of educational quality indicators for quality schools in communities under the Office of the Basic Education Commission* (Doctoral dissertation). Prince of Songkla University.
- Institute for Learning and Development Research. (2008). *Quality indicators in Bangkok schools: A good system, quality schools project*. Bangkok: Institute for Learning and Development Research.
- Jamornmarn, U. (2001). *Research report on criteria index and methods for evaluating internal and external educational quality for Thai higher education institutions*.
- Johnstone, J. N. (1981). *Indicators of education system*. London: Ancher Press.
- Kanjanawasee, S. (2007). *Evaluation theory* (5th ed.). Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press.
- Knapper, C. K., & Cropley, A. J. (2000). *Lifelong learning in higher education*. Great Britain: Kogan Page.
- Ladleia, K. (2012). *Development of indicators for early childhood education management based on the concept of peace studies in the three southern border provinces*. Yala: Faculty of Education, Yala Rajabhat University.
- Phetchuai, S. (1998). *Development of comprehensive quality indicators for faculties of education in Rajabhat institutes* (Master's thesis). Chulalongkorn University.
- Tangkao, P. (2013). Development of indicators for the effectiveness of high-competition secondary schools under the Office of the Basic Education Commission. *Journal of Educational Administration, Burapha University*, 7(2).