INTERNATIONAL
STEP by STEP
ASSOCIATION

Putting Knowledge into Practice

A GUIDEBOOK FOR EDUCATORS ON ISSA'S PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY PEDAGOGY

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ISSA's Vision

With support from family and community, every child reaches his or her full potential and develops the skills necessary for being a successful and active member of a democratic knowledge society.

ISSA Mission

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 form 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.

ISSA's overarching goal is to promote inclusive, quality care and education experiences that create the conditions for all children to become active members of democratic knowledge societies. ISSA does this through: raising awareness of the importance of quality care and education, developing resources, disseminating information, advocating, strengthening alliances, and building capacity to create conditions where all children thrive.

ISSA Promotes

- Equal access to quality education and care opportunities;
- Child-centered, individualized teaching and learning, combining high-level instruction with support for the needs of each child;
- Development of skills and dispositions for lifelong learning and participation in a democracy;
- Recognition of educators' many roles as facilitators, guides, and role models in the learning process and as active members of their communities;
- Family involvement in children's development and education;
- Community engagement in public education;
- Respect for diversity, inclusive practices, and culturally appropriate learning environments and methods; and
- Self-improvement and ongoing professional development.

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Introduction

Putting Knowledge into Practice is a guidebook that elaborates on a set of principles defining best practices in early childhood education as presented in *Competent Educators of the 21st Century: ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy.* Early childhood educators can be seen as fulfilling different roles in society, from caring for young children while their parents are at work to equipping children with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to be successful in life. ISSA's principles reflect a strong commitment to the concept that an educator's role is to provide maximum support to each child to help them grow into strong, confident, caring, responsible, and happy members of our society. As such, these principles are based on strong beliefs that include the child being at the center of educators' work, the need to build strong partnerships with families and communities, and the role of the teacher as an advocate for quality education for all children.

ISSA'S BELIEFS

ISSA's principles reflect the following beliefs:

- Every child has the right and should have access to high quality services in inclusive settings.
- Child development is holistic. Early childhood services should address all domains of children's development. Services should not focus solely on one aspect, such as care or academic education.
- Child-centered approaches that focus every child's individual needs are optimal.
- Early childhood education should promote each child's dignity, autonomy, initiative, sense of individuality, and identity.
- The young child is a citizen *now* with a strong voice, rights, and responsibilities. The role of the educator is to support the child in becoming a responsible member of society, to develop a sense of empathy and concern for others, to develop an openness and respect for diversity, to acquire skills to form, express, and justify their opinions, to listen respectfully, and be tolerant to the opinions of others.
- Early childhood is the time to begin the development of life-long learning competences, including interpersonal and civic competences, awareness about environmental issues and sustainable development, intercultural understanding, entrepreneurship, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills.
- Involving, supporting, and cooperating with all families in their children's development and learning in terms of respectfully treating families as valued and equal partners in their children's developmental processes is crucial.
- Involving communities and cooperating with them to strengthen links with different agencies in the community contributes to sustainable outcomes in early years.

These principles refer to the role of the educator as a professional who builds on what theory and research says about learning and development, while at the same time continuously extending that body of knowledge based on their own experiences through:

- Advancing the overall goal to help each child to reach his/her potential by increasing the level of quality in the classroom and advocating for quality education for every child.
- Approaching professional development in the broader framework of child-centered, interactive pedagogy.
- Promoting innovation in early childhood care and education.
- Being a self-reflective practitioner engaged in critical thinking.
- Being committed to promoting respect for diversity in an open democratic society.
- Engaging in dialogue on quality pedagogy with educational authorities, parents, and general public, NGOs, the research community, other professionals, and international agencies.

Competent Educators of the 21st Century: ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy consists of seven focus areas that reflect ISSA's main beliefs about quality pedagogy and identify ways to aspire to excellence:

1. Interactions

Interactions between adults and children, as well as peer interactions, are of key importance to supporting and influencing children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development; promoting their learning on an ongoing basis. The role of the teacher is to provide opportunities for children to engage in interactions, participate in processes to co-construct knowledge and meaning, and to become self-confident learners and contributing and caring members of society.

2. Family and Community

Strong partnerships among educators, families, and other community members are essential for children's learning and development. Recognizing the role of the home learning environment and family as the first educational and social setting of a child, the teacher is to build bridges between the school and family/community and to promote ongoing two-way communication.

3. Inclusion, Diversity, and Values of Democracy

Promoting the right of every child and family to be included, respected, and valued, to participate, to work toward common goals, and to reach their full potential with a special focus on the most vulnerable is integral to quality pedagogy. The teacher serves as a model and assures that through everyday experiences, children learn to appreciate and value diversity and develop the skills to participate in society as active citizens.

4. Assessment and Planning

Quality pedagogy recognizes the roles of assessment and planning in promoting the ongoing processes of learning that enable every child to succeed. The role of the teacher is to combine developmentally appropriate expectations, national requirements, freedom for creativity and exploration, and the interests and needs of individual children and groups of children into a cohesive framework.

5. Teaching Strategies

A quality pedagogical process builds on the belief that care, learning, and nurturing form a coherent whole, and that every child's wellbeing and engagement are prerequisites for learning. While recognizing that learning happens in different ways and in diverse situations, the teacher uses holistically planned, diverse, and meaningful teaching strategies that promote active learning and are based on democratic values.

6. Learning Environment

The learning environment greatly influences children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. By creating a physically and psychologically safe and stimulating environment, the teacher encourages children's learning through independent and group exploration, play, access to diverse resources, and interactions with other children and adults.

7. Professional Development

Quality pedagogy is implemented by educators who continually engage in ongoing professional and personal development, reflect on their practice, and work cooperatively with others modeling enjoyment of the process of lifelong learning and providing the best support for each child's development and learning.

According to ISSA's members, these areas are crucial in ensuring high quality support to children's development and learning. The seven areas promote practices that are guided by humanistic and socio-constructivist principles, emphasizing developmentally appropriate practices, individualized approach, and the idea that learning occurs in interaction. Learning is a dialogue between children and adults, as well as between children, which is marked by respecting each other, stimulating and giving autonomy to the learner, and believing that children are competent and full citizens while they continuously learn and need support from adults.

DESCRIPTION OF *PUTTING KNOWLEDGE INTO PRACTICE*

Putting Knowledge into Practice was specifically developed to accompany ***Competent Educators of the 21st Century: ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy***. It combines theory and research with descriptions of actions that educators can make in order to meet these principles of quality practice.

While building on other documents that exist in the field of early of early childhood development and education, *Competent Educators of the 21st Century: ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy* is unique in the field in that it focuses entirely on educators'/practitioners' actions (pedagogical processes) instead of looking at programs. The document and its companion guide, *Putting Knowledge into Practice*, build upon ISSA members' experience working with early childhood educators since 1994 with the initiation of the Step by Step Program—a program which was a pioneer in the CEE/CIS region in promoting democratic principles in early childhood development and education. The seven Focus Areas also follow very closely the previous *ISSA Pedagogical Standards,* a network developed tool that defined quality teaching practices and the classroom environment, which captured the changes that had occurred in the region and in research findings since the early 1990s.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This Guidebook is divided into seven chapters that follow, the **seven Focus Areas**:

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

Twenty Principles that define quality are distributed through these seven Focus Areas. Each of these Principles is introduced under a section entitled, ***Why It Is Important to*** ..... incorporate this Principle into teacher practice, including the philosophy, background, and research findings that support that principle.

In addition, each of the 20 Principles have **2–6 Indicators of Quality** (85 indicators of quality in total) which describe actions that educators make in order to fulfill these principles. Each of the subsections on **indicators of quality** includes:

- Examples of what constitutes good pedagogy described under that indicator.
- How educators can move forward to become agents of change in their schools, their communities, and their profession.
- The importance of quality experiences for children's development and learning in the early years.

WHO SHOULD USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

The ultimate purpose of *Putting Knowledge into Practice* is to be a tool that helps early childhood professionals improve the quality of their practice in order to support the development of the foundation for life-long learning in children, including the development of the skills, knowledge, aptitudes, and attitudes that children will increasingly need to manage their own learning, social and interpersonal relations, and communication.

- Early childhood educators can use the Guide to further their own professional development through self-assessment of their practice and to further their knowledge regarding the most current research and documents that support young children's learning and development, as they work either independently or cooperatively in learning communities.
- Mentors and trainers can use the Guide to structure mentoring and training sessions to help practitioners in their professional development not only to help them acquire theoretical knowledge but to become thoughtful and reflective practitioners.
- Schools and institutions that prepare educators to work in early childhood settings (pre-service training) can use the guide as a textbook or supplement to textbooks or as guide to student teacher practicum as a tool for observation, class discussion, and reflection, as well as a source for exploring the anatomy of change in the approach to early childhood development and education in the region and worldwide.
- The document can be used by organizations that wish to evaluate and support educators' practice as meeting the highest quality standards.
- It can also be used by parents and all those who are advocating for high quality early learning experiences for all children to engage in public information campaigns to build common understanding about quality pedagogy and to advocate for policies, funding, and the provision of programs for all young children.

WORD OF CAUTION

As the authors developed this book, they recognized that the language used to describe each principle/indicator was the most important part of the message contained in it. There were many lively debates on which words best described the intent of the principle/indicator in just the English version alone. As these same authors moved from English into their native languages, it was found that the entire dialogic process had to begin again. In some cases, no words were found to best describe the intent and new words either had to be created or previous words had to be re-defined. The process of working with the book cannot happen without dialogue as different words can have different meanings in different contexts. Words can also have histories of how they have traditionally been used that may not actually convey the current meaning. In addition, examples given are just that—they are examples and not checklists. More examples that describe different indicators of quality are possible and should be explored given each teacher's/educator's different cultural and linguistic contexts. This book, like its foundation document *Competent Educators of the 21st Century: ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy,* offers a framework for innovation, assessment, and improvement, and urges the user to explore new territories with children in order to best facilitate their learning experiences. The book is a starting point for discussion on what we want for our children and our societies in the 21st century.

FOCUS ON

Interactions

Interactions between adults and children, as well as peer interactions, are of key importance to supporting and influencing children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. They are also crucial in promoting children's learning on an ongoing basis by encouraging them to develop and exchange knowledge, experiences, feelings, and opinions. It is through interactions that children develop a sense of self, a sense of being a member of a community, and knowledge of the world.

The role of the educator is to provide opportunities for children to engage in interactions, to participate in processes to co-construct knowledge and meaning, to support their learning and development in a caring way, and to model respectful and supportive interactions among all adults and children involved in the children's lives.

Interactions that demonstrate and foster meaningful and respectful exchanges among all participants in the process, where everyone's voices are heard, promote children's development as self-confident learners and as contributing and caring members of society.

PRINCIPLE 1.1

The educator interacts with children in a friendly and respectful manner that supports the development of each child's construction of self/identity and learning.

1.1.1 The educator's interactions are warm and caring, expressing appreciation and enjoyment of children.

1.1.2 The educator's interactions with and expectations of children are consistent with the process of child developmental and learning.

1.1.3 The educator interacts frequently with individual children throughout the day, building on their strengths and stimulating their learning and development.

1.1.4 The educator's interactions are responsive to each child's emotional, social, physical, and cognitive strengths and needs.

1.1.5 The educator provides opportunities for children to make choices and to have those choices realized and respected by others.

1.1.6 The educator's interactions with children develop their initiative, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and leadership.

Why it is important to interact with children in a friendly and respectful manner

Brain research (Shore 1997; Gopnik et al. 1999; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Blair 2002; Rothbart and Posner 2005; Shanker 2009) is showing that warm and loving relationships between young children and adults that are positive with age- appropriate stimulation make a difference in children's development in all domains. Warm and loving relationships help children form secure attachments to their teachers, and research (Howes 1999) has shown that these attachments enhance predictions for children's futures. Young children learn about relationships through how people interact with them, including how they touch them, the tone of voice they use, and facial expressions. This is because children learn about the world through their senses—touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell. Young children also need to feel emotionally and physically secure in order to freely explore their environment, interact with others, and gain a sense of identity and self-confidence.

The concept that interactions are the key component of children's development and learning is not new. Vygotsky (1934) stated almost a century ago that all cognitive functions originate in social interactions and that learning is not simply the assimilation and accommodation of new knowledge by learners but is the process by which learners are integrated into a knowledge community. Children are integrated into a knowledge community when adults respect them as thinking and feeling unique individuals. This requires respecting their rights under General Comment 7 (2005) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC): "to encourage recognition of young children as social actors from the beginning of life, with particular interests, capacities and vulnerabilities, and of requirements for protection, guidance and support in the exercise of their rights." The most current research in the field of education not only validates this approach, but further defines exactly what kinds of interactions will predict children's engagement in learning and thus successful academic outcomes.

Laevers (2005) states that there are two main factors that influence how children are doing in an early care/education setting: how they are feeling and how engaged they are in their activities. Once again, warm, loving, and stimulating interactions are what make the difference between low and high levels of child involvement in learning activities. A high-level involvement on the part of the child is needed for "deep learning" characterized by sustained concentration, intrinsic motivation, and a sense of satisfaction resulting both from the exploratory drive itself and from working in the zone of proximal development.

Pianta, La Paro and Hamre (2006) define how deep learning can be facilitated by educators, noting that children learn the most when they are interested and engaged in learning tasks, and are most likely to be engaged when there is:

- Educator enjoyment and emotional connection with the children;
- Educator sensitivity and responsiveness to children's cognitive and emotional needs;
- An emphasis put on children's interests, motivations, and points of view; and
- Respect for children's autonomy to participate and initiate activities.

These conditions collectively and separately predict children's academic outcomes and engagement in classrooms across all grade levels (NICHD ECCRN 2002, 2003, 2005; Pianta 2003; Pianta, LaParo, and Hamre 2006).

These points are fully incorporated into these Principles and guide educators to use an approach to education that ISSA is still calling "child-centered." As stated in the Introduction, ISSA uses the term "child-centered approach" to mean an approach to instruction whereby knowledge is co-constructed between educators and children in the learning environment. Others have named this approach the "open framework" (Weikart, 2000, Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2003) and distinguish it from a "child-centered" approach, which they interpret to mean that the educator responds only when an individual child initiates an interaction. Still other educators object that "child-centered" seems to suggest that everything must be individualized to the point that children do not learn how to be part of a learning community. Despite these new interpretations of the term, ISSA continues to use "child-centered" because we feel that it best expresses what we want to happen: educators put the child at the center of what they do. Teaching is about relationships with people, not about data or discrete pieces of knowledge. It is about how knowledge can be used.

Interactions are then the key factor in whether instruction is defined as "teacher/adult-centered" or "child-centered."

An educator's interactions with children and facilitation of child-to-child interactions can demonstrate what an educator's basic view of the child is. When interactions in the classroom are truly seen as dialogues in which there is an interchange of ideas and knowledge, then it can be said that the educator sees children as active agents and constructors of knowledge. When interactions are initiated and controlled by the educator as a way to test children's knowledge, then children are seen as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge by the educator.

Researchers have pointed out the weakness of the managerial approach to working with young children, where adults either ignore or talk over them and generally dominate the proceedings (Bruner 1980; Wood, McMahon, and Cranstoun 1980; and Tizard and Hughes 1984). A more effective approach allows children to initiate or intervene in learning episodes.

The first step toward creating a child-centered classroom and involving children in the co-construction of knowledge is to group children in different formats, ensuring that whole-group activities are not the main or most important form of instruction. When educators do most of their instruction in large-group activities, it is generally observed that children give very short, rote responses that require little to no thought. On the other hand, when educators interact with children in small groups or individually, then the children have a greater opportunity to express their own thoughts, opinions, questions, strengths, and interests. Although this will be discussed later in the chapter on Focus on Assessment and Planning as an indicator of quality, it is important to understand that it is only through activities other than whole-group instruction that educators can have the more individualized interactions with children that will stimulate their learning.

Often when educators are first presented with a child-centered approach to learning, they start by rearranging the classrooms so that children can do more work in small groups; however, the nature of their interactions stays teacher-centered. This happens when the adults are still primarily giving children information; the interaction is still under the control of the adult, and the direction is from the adult to the child (ACEI 2006).

Even after the classroom has been arranged so that children can work in centers/corners or interest areas, there are several key points that educators must address to ensure that their interactions are child-centered:

1. They must understand children's needs and learning processes so that their interactions both support and challenge children.
2. They must ensure the well-being of all children.
3. Interactions between them and the children must follow a process of "co-construction" or "sustained shared thinking or activities."
4. They must individualize instruction to children's needs.
5. Children must be able to make choices.
6. They must understand that children need to be highly motivated and involved in learning activities if they are to learn.
7. Children must be not only able but encouraged to interact and learn from other children.

NAEYC (2003) states that as professionals, educators need to "go beyond narrow or outdated developmental concepts" and understand and work with the multiple influences on children's development that include cultural and linguistic contexts, relationships with key adults and peers, economic conditions, health status and disabilities, individual developmental variations, learning styles, exposure to technology and media, and family and community characteristics. Educators use that knowledge to promote children's physical and psychological health, safety, and sense of security. Children are viewed as active agents, not as passive recipients. Educators support children to make meaning from their experiences while at the same time challenging or stretching them. They engage in pedagogical interactions that allow educators and children to co-construct knowledge, differentiating or individualizing instruction to be at the right level of challenge so that all children are highly motivated and involved in learning activities.

Katz and Katz (2009) note that all interactions must have content. They point out that the majority of interactions in early childhood education settings are "dominated by routines and rules of the daily schedule of events." These interactions lack intellectual content such as "children's questions, ideas, theories, hypotheses, thoughts about their plans and so forth." They "neglect the importance of children's intellectual development" and to fail to strengthen "children's in-born dispositions to make sense of their environment."

Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) in a summary of the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) and the

Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) studies point out that the most effective settings for intellectual, social, and dispositional outcomes are where educators and children engage in "sustained shared thinking." The co-construction of knowledge that happens in an interaction between a child and the educator means that each of them is involved and that the content is in some way instructive. There are several important points that need to be understood about the sustained-shared-thinking process:

1. The educator must have a very good understanding of the pedagogical content knowledge in order to stretch children's thinking about the topic.
2. The educator must have experience with open-ended questioning.
3. The educator must create a classroom in which children can also initiate episodes of sustained shared thinking and must know how to extend this through supporting children.

Sustained shared thinking occurs when educators individualize their interactions and when they provide opportunities for children to make choices. Montie, Xiang, and Schweinhart (2006) point out that when children choose activities, they tend to be interesting and engaging to them and the difficulty level is suitable. On the other hand, when educators propose specific activities instead of letting children choose, the activities are often too easy or too difficult or simply not interesting to some children. Free-choice activities not only provide children with an opportunity to initiate sustained shared thinking episodes, they also respect children's sense of initiative by acknowledging their interests, giving them room for experimentation, letting them decide how an activity is performed and when a product is finished, and implicating them in the setting of rules and the solution of conflicts that arise .

Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) caution, however, that there has to be balance of teacher-initiated and teacher-supported free-choice activities. In the book *The Intentional Teacher*, Epstein (2007 b) comments:

> In some content areas children seem to learn best from child-guided experience acquiring knowledge and skills through their own exploration and experience, including interaction with peers. At other times, children seem to learn best from adult guided experience that is in set up situations in which educators introduce information, model skills, and the like.

In order for interactions to have content, educators must have skills and knowledge in many areas. They must:

- Know the content (concepts, vocabulary, facts, skills) that make up each area of learning;
- Know and use general teaching strategies that are effective with young children;
- Match content with children's developmental levels and emerging abilities;
- Carefully observe children to determine their interests and level of understanding;
- Interact with different individuals and groups;
- Neither underestimate nor overestimate what children can do and learn;
- Challenge children to question their own thinking and conclusions;
- Scaffold learning, carefully introducing new material and ideas; and
- Reflect on children's learning based on their responses.

(adapted from Epstein 2007b)

Quality interactions begin with the educator. "Once we begin to look at the way adults interact with children we realise how powerful these dimensions are. In view of getting high levels of well-being and involvement the person of the teacher is even more important than other dimensions of the context, such as the space, the material and the activities on offer" (Laevers 2009).