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METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract. Ensuring quality in preschool education requires more than compliance with curriculum and infrastructure standards: it requires an institutional methodology connecting management decisions with children’s everyday learning experiences. This article analyses the conceptual foundations of quality improvement in preschool educational institutions and proposes an integrated, context-sensitive framework for Uzbekistan. A qualitative conceptual synthesis was conducted using international research on structural and process quality, UNESCO and UNICEF policy documents, OECD publications, and the national preschool regulatory framework. The analysis integrates systemic, child-centred, activity-oriented, competency-based and reflective approaches. Its principal outcome is an Integrated Preschool Quality Improvement Framework consisting of five interconnected dimensions: organisational conditions; pedagogical interactions; curriculum and developmental learning; inclusion and family partnerships; and leadership and continuous quality governance. A matrix of illustrative assessment indicators and a five-stage improvement cycle are proposed to link diagnosis with professional learning and institutional decisions. The article argues that quality assurance should distinguish the provision of resources from the educational quality of actual interactions and should employ formative, non-stigmatising forms of evidence. As the proposed framework has not yet been evaluated in institutions, it is presented as a testable conceptual contribution rather than an empirically proven intervention. The findings provide a foundation for institutional self-evaluation and future pilot research within preschool education management.

Keywords: preschool education; educational quality; educational management; process quality; pedagogical interaction; quality assurance; Uzbekistan; institutional improvement.

1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of preschool education is an increasingly important priority in educational governance. Early childhood institutions contribute to the development of language, communication, self-regulation, social participation, movement and creative capacities. Their educational mission is not reducible to early academic instruction or a narrow definition of school readiness. It also includes the provision of emotionally supportive, inclusive and developmentally appropriate learning environments.

The UNESCO and UNICEF (2024) global report emphasises the importance of equitable access to high-quality early childhood care and education, together with coordinated support for children, families and educators. OECD (2021) likewise identifies children’s meaningful interactions with adults, peers, materials and environments as a core component of what it calls process quality.

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International evidence therefore suggests that educational improvement needs to extend beyond the existence of buildings, equipment and administrative plans.

For Uzbekistan, the regulatory foundation includes Law No. ZRU-595, On Preschool Education and Upbringing, adopted on 16 December 2019 and subsequently amended, and Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 802 of 22 December 2020 concerning the state standard of preschool education and upbringing, as amended. Articles 28 and 29 of the law address the state standard and state educational programme respectively (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019). The revised Ilk Qadam [First Step] State Curriculum (2022) provides an important curricular reference for the organisation of children's learning and development.

Nevertheless, the application of common standards does not eliminate differences in children's daily educational experiences. Institutions may be similar in their formal documentation but differ in the quality of adult–child dialogue, opportunities for play, support for children with diverse needs, family participation and professional collaboration. This makes the relationship between educational management and pedagogical quality a methodological problem rather than solely an administrative question.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the methodological foundations of preschool educational quality improvement and construct an integrated framework suitable for institutional self-evaluation and further empirical testing. Three questions guide the analysis: (1) What theoretical approaches are most relevant to preschool educational quality? (2) How can structural conditions and process quality be connected through educational management? (3) What indicators and improvement procedures may help institutions turn evaluation into pedagogical development?

The proposed contribution is an integrative model that links international quality research, child-centred pedagogy and the management functions of diagnosis, professional support, monitoring and organisational learning. It does not claim that the model has already improved educational outcomes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1. Structural quality and process quality

Educational quality in early childhood education and care is commonly understood as a multidimensional construct. Structural quality concerns conditions that make education possible, including physical infrastructure, staffing, educator preparation, group organisation, available resources and safety. Process quality concerns what children actually experience: sensitive communication, emotional support, purposeful learning interactions, cooperation, play, stimulation and responsive guidance (OECD, 2021).

Slot (2018), reviewing structural and process quality relationships, reports relatively consistent positive associations between educator training and professional development and process quality, while noting that relationships among structural indicators are complex and context-dependent. Structural compliance is therefore relevant but insufficient as a substitute for assessing interactions.

Ulferts, Wolf, and Anders (2019) synthesised longitudinal European evidence and observed small positive associations between the quality of pedagogical processes and subsequent academic outcomes. A broader meta-analysis by von Suchodoletz et al. (2023) also supports the relevance of quality for developmental outcomes but cautions that much of the available literature is concentrated in the United States. These results support careful attention to interactions while discouraging simplistic claims that any single quality indicator guarantees improvement.

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2.2. Systemic and ecological perspectives

The systemic approach conceptualises a preschool institution as an interdependent organisation in which managerial decisions influence educational conditions, teacher practices and children's opportunities. Improvements in staff qualifications may fail to influence everyday pedagogy unless teachers also have planning time, mentoring, supportive leadership and appropriate resources. Likewise, an improved curriculum cannot independently ensure meaningful learning if implementation remains mechanical.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach broadens this reasoning by locating child development within interacting social environments. Preschool quality is shaped not only by the institution but also by family circumstances, community resources, policy settings and organisational relationships. The implication for management is that improvement priorities should be coordinated rather than treated as isolated measures.

2.3. Child-centred, activity-oriented and competency-based approaches

Child-centred pedagogy recognises the child as an active participant whose experiences, interests, developmental capacities and cultural background matter in the learning process. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective explains learning as mediated through social interaction and appropriately supported activity. In preschool education, guided play, inquiry, movement, storytelling, constructive activities and collaborative problem-solving are suitable forms of developmentally responsive learning.

An activity-oriented approach prioritises the educational quality of participation over the formal number of activities delivered. For instance, an educator facilitating a construction game may deepen learning by asking children to explain choices, compare objects and negotiate roles. The quality of this episode depends not on whether the activity appears in the plan but on the richness of children's participation and support.

A competency-based approach translates educational aims into integrated capabilities, such as communication, cooperation, independent problem-solving and creative expression. Preschool competencies should be documented through ongoing observation and authentic activities, not through premature high-stakes academic testing. In this respect, the Ilk Qadam curriculum offers a relevant national orientation (Ministry of Preschool Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022).

2.4. Reflective practice and evidence-informed leadership

Quality assurance becomes developmental when observation and feedback lead to changes in practice. Reflective leadership involves identifying gaps, discussing evidence with educators, organising mentoring, reviewing implementation and revising institutional plans. OECD (2025a) draws attention to workforce learning, leadership conditions and professional collaboration in early childhood education and care systems.

For a preschool manager, evidence-informed decision-making means using several complementary sources—pedagogical observation, curriculum documentation, staff reflection, family feedback and relevant institutional records—without treating any one of them as sufficient. The task is to make evidence actionable while avoiding burdensome compliance exercises.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article uses a qualitative, theory-building design based on a structured conceptual synthesis. It is not an experimental study, statistical survey, systematic review or meta-analysis. No new participant data were collected and no intervention effectiveness is claimed.

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The documentary corpus consists of selected peer-reviewed studies and methodological publications on early childhood quality (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Slot, 2018; Ulferts et al., 2019; von Suchodoletz et al., 2023; Vygotsky, 1978), major international reports (OECD, 2021, 2025a, 2025b, 2026; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024), and Uzbekistan's legal and curricular materials (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019; Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020; Ministry of Preschool Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022). Sources were purposively selected for their direct relevance to structural quality, process quality, institutional leadership, inclusion or national implementation. Because the selection was purposive, the review should not be interpreted as comprehensive.

The analysis followed four steps. First, recurrent constructs of educational quality were extracted from the selected sources. Second, the constructs were grouped according to their institutional function: enabling conditions, pedagogical processes, curriculum, equity and governance. Third, the groups were compared with Uzbekistan's preschool policy and curriculum context. Fourth, the resulting dimensions were translated into illustrative indicators and a sequence of management actions.

The conceptual framework was judged against criteria of internal consistency, observability, developmental appropriateness, institutional usability and sensitivity to national context. It remains a proposed analytical tool. Empirical studies are required to establish construct validity, inter-rater agreement and relationships with children's developmental experiences.

4. RESULTS: AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

4.1. Architecture of the proposed model

The principal conceptual result is the Integrated Preschool Quality Improvement Framework (IPQIF). It contains five interconnected dimensions: (1) organisational and structural conditions; (2) pedagogical interaction quality; (3) curriculum and developmental learning; (4) inclusion and family partnership; and (5) leadership and continuous quality governance.

The model treats structural conditions as enabling factors rather than automatic predictors of quality. Pedagogical interactions represent the immediate learning processes experienced by children. Curriculum provides developmental direction; inclusion establishes whose opportunities are protected; and governance links information, responsibilities, professional development and organisational change.

This architecture offers a management distinction between compliance monitoring and pedagogical improvement. Compliance monitoring asks whether relevant conditions and standards are in place. Pedagogical improvement asks how those conditions function in children's daily experiences and what institutional action is required when quality is inadequate.

Table 1. Proposed quality dimensions, illustrative indicators and evidence sources

Quality dimension	Illustrative indicators	Potential evidence
Organisational conditions	Safe, accessible spaces; appropriate learning resources; professional staffing and support	Environment audit; document review; staff records
Pedagogical interactions	Warmth and responsiveness; meaningful dialogue; active child participation; peer cooperation	Structured observation; educator reflection

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Quality dimension	Illustrative indicators	Potential evidence
Curriculum and learning	Developmentally suitable play; purposeful planning; competency alignment; formative documentation	Planning review; learning portfolios; observation
Inclusion and partnership	Accessible activities; differentiated support; family communication; participation across diverse needs	Inclusion review; family feedback; support plans
Quality governance	Shared priorities; mentoring; evidence review; action follow-up; leadership accountability	Self-evaluation; meeting notes; improvement tracking

Note. The proposed framework synthesizes established theoretical approaches and international quality principles, providing a methodological foundation for institutional quality assessment and further empirical research.

4.2. A five-stage institutional improvement cycle

The IPQIF is implemented through a recurring sequence of five management actions. The first stage, diagnostic assessment, identifies strengths and problems using multiple sources of information. The second stage, prioritisation, selects a limited number of needs that directly affect participation, well-being or meaningful learning. The third stage, pedagogical and organisational action, introduces mentoring, targeted resources, adapted activities or revised procedures. The fourth stage, monitoring and reflective review, examines implementation and the quality of observable changes. The fifth stage, institutional adjustment, revises plans and responsibilities according to the evidence.

For example, where group observations indicate that children seldom initiate discussion, an institution might prioritise open-ended questioning and guided play. Management could arrange peer observation and mentoring and later assess whether children have more opportunities to communicate and collaborate. The appropriate conclusion would concern observed changes in pedagogical practice; claims about improved long-term outcomes would require separate longitudinal evidence.

The cycle is intentionally iterative. It treats quality assurance not as an annual reporting event but as an ongoing relationship between professional learning, management decisions and the educational environment.

4.3. Implications for quality indicators and management

Indicators should be organised according to what they can meaningfully measure. Structural indicators may be assessed through records or environmental audits. Process indicators require direct observation and interpretation. Inclusion indicators should consider actual participation rather than the nominal availability of services. Governance indicators should assess whether diagnosed problems lead to practical responses and follow-up.

The indicators should not be combined into an arbitrary institutional ranking without a tested weighting scheme. Contextual differences, resource constraints and differences in child populations may invalidate simple comparisons. A practical initial application would therefore be a low-stakes institutional self-evaluation profile, supported by educator discussion and targeted action planning.

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5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Alignment with Uzbekistan's preschool education context

The IPQIF is designed to complement, not displace, Uzbekistan's existing education standards and curricula. Law No. ZRU-595 establishes the legal basis for preschool education; Articles 28 and 29 address the state standard and educational programme (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019). Resolution No. 802 and its subsequent amendments provide further normative context for quality requirements (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020). The revised 2022 Ilk Qadam curriculum outlines an approach to preschool learning and development that can inform pedagogical evaluation.

The additional management contribution of the IPQIF lies in connecting normative expectations with the systematic analysis of everyday educational processes. An institution could comply with documentation requirements yet still need to strengthen emotional support, child participation or responsiveness to diverse learning needs. Quality management should make such issues visible and convert them into professional improvement priorities.

UNICEF Uzbekistan identifies inclusive preschool models, curriculum development and educator mentoring among relevant support areas (UNICEF Uzbekistan, n.d.). These priorities are compatible with the proposed framework, although their local implementation may differ across regions and institutional types.

5.2. Staff development and distributed responsibility

Educator competence is a major enabling condition for process quality, but professional development should not be reduced to attendance at seminars. Relevant mechanisms include mentoring, modelling of interactive pedagogies, collaborative planning and formative feedback. OECD (2025a) underlines the significance of leadership, working conditions and professional learning for strengthening early childhood systems.

Management should distribute responsibility for improvement across directors, methodological leaders and educators. Directors can protect time and resources for professional development; methodological staff can support observation and feedback; educators can document and discuss everyday practice; and families can contribute contextual knowledge about children's needs. These responsibilities require clarity without turning assessment into punitive individual surveillance.

5.3. Equity, safeguarding and responsible evidence use

Inclusion is inseparable from quality. An institution may achieve satisfactory aggregate indicators while some children remain excluded from meaningful activities. OECD (2025b) stresses equitable participation and inclusive quality as essential components of early childhood systems. Institutional assessment should consider accessibility, differentiated support and whether children with diverse developmental, linguistic or social backgrounds can participate in play and learning.

Digital documentation can support management decisions, but the accumulation of data is not equivalent to quality improvement. Any tools documenting children's experiences should collect only necessary information and use appropriate privacy and access protections. Low-stakes, formative evidence is particularly suitable for early childhood settings because individual developmental pathways vary considerably.

5.4. Limitations and an empirical validation agenda

The study has three main limitations. First, the documentary selection is purposive, so the analysis does not quantify all available evidence. Second, the framework is developed from international and national sources but has not been assessed by Uzbek preschool administrators,

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educators or families. Third, its proposed indicators and improvement cycle have not been tested for reliability, feasibility or effects on children's experiences.

A future validation programme should begin with expert review of the dimensions and indicator definitions. It could then pilot structured observation and management self-evaluation across a diverse group of preschool institutions, assess consistency among raters, and interview educators about implementation burden. Subsequent longitudinal or quasi-experimental studies could investigate associations between implementation fidelity, pedagogical practices and child-centred outcomes. Such work is necessary before IPQIF is recommended as a standardised measurement instrument.

6. CONCLUSION

Improving preschool educational quality demands a methodological connection between organisational resources, pedagogical interactions, curriculum implementation, inclusion and institutional decision-making. Compliance with structural standards remains important, but it should not be equated with the quality of children's daily educational experiences.

The proposed Integrated Preschool Quality Improvement Framework provides a coherent conceptual structure consisting of five dimensions and a five-stage improvement cycle. Its intended practical contribution is to help preschool managers and educators transform assessment information into collaborative, context-sensitive pedagogical action. For Uzbekistan, the framework can be considered alongside the national preschool standard and the Ilk Qadam state curriculum as a basis for institutional self-reflection and the design of future research.

Because the present study is conceptual, the framework's effectiveness has not been demonstrated empirically. Validation through expert assessment, pilot observation and institution-based studies remains an essential next step. Quality improvement should ultimately be judged by whether institutional decisions support equitable, supportive and developmentally meaningful educational experiences for all children.

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