

Quality Counts

Developing indicators in children's education

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INTRODUCTION

This publication aims to help you think through some of the issues involved in measuring education quality, and the role of indicators in that process.

Who is it for?

This is part of a series of study modules, designed for staff of Save the Children UK (SC UK) who work in a wide variety of education programmes around the world. We hope they will be useful more broadly within the Save the Children Alliance, and to other organisations with similar aims.

These modules are designed to help you think about how your education programmes can improve the *purpose and quality of the education* which children receive. This is highlighted as the first objective in SC UK's Education Strategy:

SC UK's Education Strategy, 2000-2004
Objective 1:

Purpose and quality of education

To equip children with knowledge, skills and understanding to help them deal with real life challenges and to become active members of society; by promoting education that is:

- responsive
- relevant
- developmentally appropriate
- participatory

Each module focuses on one set of issues raised by trying to put this shared vision of purposeful education into practice in our programmes.

The examples are mostly from the field of basic primary schooling, but the same key concepts underpin all SC UK education work, whatever the age of the children or the context.

How should the modules be used?

- The series is designed for use by teams (though the modules may also be read by individuals). It is intended to be read and discussed, and used as the basis for self-training, to build confidence to act and advocate.
- 'Teams' are self-defining — they could be groups of national staff in the country offices, groups of project staff, or managers at the regional level.

- The aim is for people working together to reach a consensus on where they are and what they can usefully do.
- Use the modules flexibly: they can be built on or adapted for whatever level is appropriate, with different examples and new material being substituted locally as required.
- Each module includes some 'workshop tools' — suggestions for activities to be carried out in a workshop setting, to help readers connect the points made in the module to their own context and experience.

WHAT IS AN INDICATOR?

We use the word 'indicator' to mean evidence that something has happened, or that an objective has been achieved. It is a tool for measuring change.

Several SC UK publications and documents deal with the general principles of monitoring and evaluation and the role of indicators. If you are not familiar with these, please consult them. Here we consider more specifically how these principles can be applied to questions of education quality.

Indicators vary depending on the nature of the changes that the programme is trying to stimulate. Consequently, in this publication we do not try to define sets of indicators that can be 'applied' to any programme. The examples given illustrate just some of the many approaches that have been taken in defining and using indicators of education quality.

We hope that the questions raised here, together with the workshop tools, will help you to think about the needs in *your* context, so that your team can agree on practical, appropriate and effective ways to measure what changes in education quality are being achieved through your programme.

SECTION 1: MEASURING CHANGE IN EDUCATION

Why is it difficult to measure change in education quality?

SC UK's education work takes place in many different contexts, and its programmes take many different forms. They all aim to support changes which will improve the quality of education received by children. How will we know if we are achieving that aim? There are several problems in trying to do this:

It is difficult to agree on *what makes good quality education*. Until we have done this, we will not be able to identify the changes we are trying to measure.

- This module aims to clarify what we, as an organisation, think makes a good quality education. It also aims to help you identify what positive changes you are seeking for children in your area.

Any qualitative change is *hard to measure systematically*. Whatever elements of 'education quality' we can agree on, they are likely to involve a range of subjective and vague concepts, such as identity, culture, self-esteem and aspirations. These are all things which we know are critical to individual and social development, but the kind of evidence or indicators we are often asked to look for (the kind that can be easily measured) do not necessarily reflect what is really important about the work. It is easy to show whether enrolment rates have increased, but more difficult to show whether children in those schools are gaining the skills, knowledge and confidence to help them in their present and future lives.

- A key message in this module is — do not be intimidated. If you know something is sensible or important, then make that point, although it may be difficult to prove it statistically.

Education is a *life long process* of individual development. It starts before, and goes beyond school, taking place in a constantly changing social context. It is difficult to track the effects of educational processes in the short term, and impossible to be sure how much personal development can be attributed to what happens in school and how much is influenced by what is going on outside school — positive or negative.

- In this module we encourage a realistic and practical approach to what we can and cannot measure. The focus is on whether the changes we advocate are taking place, and whether they are having a positive impact on children.

What changes are we trying to achieve?

Everyone has their own idea about what makes a good quality education. However, as an organisation we need to develop a *collective understanding* of what changes we are trying to achieve through our education programmes. This defines what we will try to measure.

A starting point is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which provides us with a working definition of the *purpose of education*:

Article 29: *The purpose of education is to develop children's personality and talents, to prepare them for active adult life, to foster respect for basic human rights, and a respect for the child's own culture and those of others.*

When we talk of 'quality' issues in education, we refer to the processes and systems that would be needed to achieve this vision of a purposeful education. Several organisations which use the UNCRC as a basis for their work, have tried to define in more detail the essential *elements of education quality*. UNICEF, for example, has developed a definition which encompasses five different areas:⁴

Areas of education quality (UNICEF, 2000)

- 1. learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and are supported in learning by their families and communities**
- 2. environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities**
- 3. content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace**
- 4. processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches, in well-managed classrooms and schools, and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities**
- 5. outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.**

SC UK's education strategy recognises all these as important, and different programmes prioritise different areas. Our particular focus as an organisation, however, has been on the *education delivery processes* that are needed to achieve any of these — ie, education should be delivered in a way that is responsive (to children's needs and local contexts), relevant, developmentally appropriate, and participatory.ⁱⁱⁱ Our programmes work through communities, in partnership with governments or national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to encourage this kind of educational provision.

However, those of us who are responsible for designing, implementing and evaluating education programmes need to go several steps further than this in defining the changes we seek to achieve and measure. We need, among other

things, to develop a shared understanding of the kinds of *learning processes* that are likely to help children gain the type of education envisaged in the UNCRD.

Workshop tool 1 — what makes an effective learning process?

To clarify your own ideas about what makes quality education, it can be helpful to think about our own educational experiences and find common features of a good educational process that we can agree on.

- Think of **two things** that you learnt during the early years of your childhood/education (knowledge, skills, attitude, belief, etc) that
 - a) you still have as a resource in your life
 - b) that you are glad you have.
- One of these should be learnt in school, and one out of school.
- In pairs, or groups of three, tell each other about learning these things. After listening to each other's stories, individually write down a few points on what it was that helped people learn these things.
- Get together in a large group and put these points together in a list, with the ones you agree on the most at the top, and those that not everyone agrees with at the bottom.
- Which ones apply to some cultures/contexts and not others? Which are universal?
- From the points in your list, can you pick out a few key features of an effective learning process?

This workshop exercise has already been carried out by several SC UK teams around the world. In every case similar conclusions have been reached: that learning is **active** (you do it, no one can do it to you) and **interactive** (you learn by having a chance to interact with what is around you, other children, adults), and the nature of that interaction is critical. This means that people learn things more effectively if they:

- reflect on their own experience
- discover for themselves and in interaction with others, rather than having someone present them with the 'facts' or 'answers'
- learn in a friendly, mutually encouraging atmosphere.

What is the point of measuring what has changed?

It may seem obvious to us, and to those involved in our programmes, that our interventions are improving the quality of education and thereby bringing benefits to children. However, systematic monitoring and evaluation throughout the project cycle is important, and is usually carried out for one of the following purposes:

1. Learning: drawing lessons from past and present activities in order to plan or improve future activities and contribute to policy development.

Effective evaluation of education quality can:

- give insights into children's needs
- help us to identify what works well, so that we can build on it, and what does not work so well, so that we can address it
- provide an opportunity to promote the participation of parents, teachers, children and the wider community, encouraging them to reflect on children's educational needs and their own attitudes to education
- highlight problems and potential solutions which can help us to influence education policy at many levels — locally, within our own and partner organisations, nationally and internationally.

2. Accountability: providing information on the effectiveness or efficiency of initiatives.

The pressure to evaluate our education work comes from two main sources:

- managers within SC UK, and those we depend on (financially and in other ways) to support our work. This requirement to evaluate can feel like a burden, particularly if we are accountable to more than one donor. Learning and accountability, however, are crucially linked: it is by finding out what works best that managers and donors can make good decisions about the best way to spend scarce resources
- local groups and structures to whom we should be accountable — to the government education providers with whom we work in partnership, to the community, and to the teachers and children in schools.

The evaluation will have a different focus depending on who it is aimed at. Also the kind of indicators and evaluation methodologies we use will depend largely on the underlying purpose of our evaluation. The process of evaluation involves investing time and energy, as well as financial resources. It makes sense, therefore, for us to think carefully about who and what the evaluation is for, so that the methods we use are appropriate, and the information we gather is used well. The following workshop activity should help your team to reflect on why you are carrying out an evaluation and what kind of approach you might take.^{iv}

Workshop tool 2 — what is the purpose of our evaluation?

1. Think about an evaluation of education work that you have recently carried out or are planning to do.
2. Would you say that you decided to do the evaluation *mainly*:
 - a) because you needed to be accountable? or
 - b) because you wanted to learn lessons?
3. Different characteristics of evaluations are listed below. Highlight the ones which describe your evaluation.
 - Evaluators include staff, beneficiaries and other stakeholders.
 - Examples used in the evaluation are selected at random, ideally to represent the whole population.
 - There is emphasis on finding out reasons for successes and failures.
 - Evaluators are independent and objective — probably external.
 - The aim of the evaluation is to improve future activities.
 - A mix of quantitative and qualitative data is used, but the emphasis is on qualitative data.
 - The evaluation is carried out at the end of the project/programme cycle.
 - The examples used are selected if they illustrate a point or if they have potential for transferability.
 - The aim of the evaluation is to find out about current and past activities.
 - The emphasis is on quantitative data.
 - The emphasis is on how successful/unsuccessful the project has been.
 - The evaluation is carried out as the project/programme develops, as part of the planning cycle.
4. Decide which of the above characteristics best describe evaluations carried out for the purposes of **accountability**, and which ones best describe evaluations for **learning purposes**? (You could do this by drawing up two columns; 'learning' and 'accountability', or by writing each characteristic onto a card and then grouping them.)
5. Are the characteristics which describe your evaluation all in the same column? Or are they divided between both columns?

If we are serious about understanding what kind of interventions can bring benefits to children's learning, then we are interested in the kind of approach described in the 'learning' column. (although the reality is that most of us carry out evaluations for purposes of accountability). You may find that your evaluation has characteristics in both the 'learning' and 'accountability' columns — we often carry out evaluations for both purposes, and of course there is a cross-over between the two types of evaluation described above.

SECTION 2: WHAT SHOULD WE MEASURE

In this section we consider three ways of thinking about indicators of change in education quality:

- indicators that better educational outcomes are being achieved
- indicators that better educational processes are taking place
- indicators of impact of particular initiatives.

Indicators of educational outcomes

Traditionally, education systems measure their achievements by outcomes. That is, they judge how good an educational experience has been by testing whether children have learnt what the system intended them to learn. If a school, or a national education system, produces better examination results in year two, compared to year one, we conclude that the quality of education provided has improved.

However, we need to be aware that there are limitations in relying too heavily on tests, or educational outcome measurements:

- They do not tell us if what children have learnt at school is useful to them, either for their present and future lives.
- They do not take account of where children start from, or what obstacles they may have had to overcome in order to learn.
- The process of formal examinations is often biased against marginalised groups.
- They are based on a (false) assumption that education is a linear process, ie, you take a child, apply some education, and end up with an educated child. In reality, learning is an ongoing, complex process involving a number of external factors which it is hard to take account of.

It is possible to define (and measure) outcomes which are more qualitative in nature. Numeracy, for example, is not just about being able to count and calculate, but about understanding how these skills can be used in daily life. Literacy can be functionally measured, for example, not just 'can they read a school text?' but 'can they read something they have not read before, understand it, and see its relevance for them?'

These are complex questions, which have certainly not been solved by most national education systems.

For a development agency working in education, alongside or with national education systems, the advantage of measuring by outcomes is that this is universally perceived as an indicator of educational 'success'. So, for instance, if

we wished to demonstrate that a particular educational approach (being piloted by our programme) provides better quality education than children normally receive, an effective means to demonstrate this would be to test the performance of children in schools that are using the contrasting approaches. Even if we have not always thought about this when designing a programme, it may still be possible to apply indicators of learning achievement later.

Example 1 — learning through mother tongue, in villages in Mali

In a poor district in Mali, where less than ten per cent of children attended school, SC UK supported communities in two remote villages to build their own schools. They used an alternative government curriculum (called the *Pedagogie Convergente*) and village adults who had some schooling were trained to teach.

Many government education officials were sceptical that a school with unqualified teachers could succeed, but there were two features of the curriculum that SC UK staff believed might help children do better than those in government schools.

1. The *Pedagogie Convergente* teaches through the local language, rather than French, for the first few years.
2. The community was involved in adapting this curriculum to reflect real life conditions in the villages.

It was obvious to early visitors to the schools that the children were learning enthusiastically and making progress in basic literacy. However, there was as yet no way to compare this with the progress of children learning through French in government schools. The project team took steps to change this. In collaboration with the local education authority and the communities, a set of quality indicators was developed, which is now being used to monitor the progress of the children in the village schools. At the same time the education authority was asked to introduce tests at the end of each school year — the same ones that are used in government schools — so that it will be possible to make comparisons.

For more detail, see the case study in *Towards Responsive Schools*

Another useful function for SC UK education programmes to support, is the development of more appropriate outcome indicators within national systems. A project in Peru took on this challenge, and defined educational outcomes in quite far-reaching qualitative terms:

Example 2 — indicator development and policy debate in Peru

In the mid-1990s there was concern among NGOs and educationalists in Peru that the government and World Bank (a major investor in schools) were placing too much emphasis on measuring education outcomes that contribute to economic growth, rather than children's needs or human development.

In response, SC UK supported an education 'think-tank', *Foro Educativo*, to produce a set of child-focused indicators. A wide network of people working in education was used, and eventually agreed the basis on which these indicators should be selected. They considered the following to be the basic needs of all children:

survival protection affection
understanding participation recreation
creativity identity liberty

Seven indicators were identified for each basic need. This process highlighted the importance of factors that had not previously been seen as important to monitor, such as the relationship between students and teachers.

One criticism of these indicators is that they rely too heavily on things which can be easily counted, (eg. number of schools offering occupational skills workshops), rather than seeking more qualitative information. Nevertheless, these child focused indicators have been successful in sparking debate, between policymakers and stakeholders, on how to achieve and measure improvements in education quality, by analysing children's needs as a starting point.

These indicators were conceived as a tool for evaluating education quality at the national level, and *Foro Educativo* used them as part of its advocacy work with the Ministry of Education. A National Consultation was held on education, with this pilot project on indicators being considered as one of the tools for reform.

For more detail, see the case study in *Towards Responsive Schools*

Indicators of good educational processes

The results of the Peru project point to a critical aspect of evaluating education — it is the process itself that matters. A large body of research in education shows that children have huge learning capacities, which are seldom fully utilised. What determines whether they can learn effectively is the learning environment — the relationships between learner and teacher, the methods used, the processes

which support teachers to create positive learning environments. So, to encourage better educational quality, the desired change is better educational processes. Measuring change in these is likely to be a more reliable indicator of improved quality than measuring narrowly-defined outcomes.

Example 3 — children's own indicators of education quality in Colombia

Partly inspired by the concept of child focused indicators piloted in Peru, a project in Colombia supports children and young people in primary and secondary schools to develop their own indicators of education quality. The objective is to improve education quality by identifying changes that can be made within their own schools — many of which are about process rather than outcomes — as well as influencing policymakers in local and national education authorities.

The project is being carried out through three national NGOs (Volvamos a la Gente, Paulo VI and CINDE) in a selection of rural and urban primary and secondary schools, where work on child rights was already underway through students councils and child rights committees. The children run workshops to analyse the purpose of education, produce indicators of education quality, and agree on plans of action to achieve these indicators.

The process is child-led, in line with the participatory philosophy of the project, but the success of the project depends also on the commitment and co-operation of teachers in the school and of local education officials. The first phase of the project is complete, with each school having defined its own indicators. The participants are now embarking on the second phase, in which plans of action will be put into practice to try to bring about change in schools and with policymakers.

In applying indicators of good educational processes, we need to keep in mind that we are not measuring absolute levels (eg, of teacher skill in using such methods) but *the direction of change*. Many education systems have a baseline of approaches that are far from ideal, and the starting point differs enormously from one context to another. Teachers' exposure to the new methods may be very recent in some cases, longstanding in others; there may be good materials to back up interactive teaching in some contexts, none in others. What is more important is to measure change from the given starting point. Once we are confident that such changes are happening, and are being internalised so that they are likely to last, we can make some reasoned assumptions about their likely impact.

Indicators of educational impact

Measuring impact is about identifying changes (expected or unexpected, positive or negative) which have come about as a result of a particular intervention. If our purpose is to work out whether real benefits arose from SC UK programmes, these are the kind of changes to focus on.

SC UK guidance on measuring impact suggests that we consider what impact has been achieved within any of the following five 'dimensions of change'.

Common dimensions of change of SC UK work

1. direct benefits to children
2. wider impact on policies, practice ideas and beliefs
3. enhanced children's participation
4. reducing discrimination (eg, by gender, disability or ethnicity)
5. improved partnership and collaborative working (eg, with local NGOs or government, capacity building, innovative forms of partnership).

Whichever area we are concerned with, we need to be realistic about the extent to which we can observe impact, and — even where impact is clear — how far we can attribute those changes to our interventions.

- **How much can you expect to observe now?**
Initiatives to improve education quality can have an impact at several different stages during a child's school career and beyond. The changing attitudes of policy makers take time to show results in practice. Within the current period, we may only be able to measure the beginning of such a time-line.
- **What else may be having an impact?**
Everything — from an individual child's ability to learn, to the effectiveness of a whole school system — will be affected by external factors such as conflict, migration and HIV/AIDS.

The key is to be realistic about how much we can demonstrate, how far we can track impact, and how far we can attribute the changes to one particular set of initiatives. However, the difficulty in 'proving' links should not discourage us from making sensible judgements. For instance, it may be impractical to try to *prove* that a good educational experience, promoted by our programme, has produced better-adjusted children with skills which will help them to cope in a changing society. (however confident we may be that this is the case). But, we *may* be able to show the more immediate impact of our intervention on teaching methods, on children's experience in school, on their self-esteem and confidence. In some

cases, as in the example below, the impact of our work may include unexpected benefits.

Example 4 — health education for girls in Afghanistan

In the troubled political context of Afghanistan under the Taliban, health was one of the few areas in which it has been acceptable for girls to receive education outside the home. Modules, specifically for use with girls, were prepared by the SC UK health educator to convey simple but important health messages. These were used by a number of partner agencies working both within Afghanistan and in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. The project was well received by communities who saw the content of the course as extremely relevant to their needs, and the participation of girls.

An evaluation carried out by the team confirmed that the project had not only had a direct impact on health, but had also had an impact on levels of empowerment, self-esteem and confidence. The project had given girls an opportunity to come together outside the home, to take part in an education programme, and to acquire knowledge and skills which allowed them to take some control over their lives and that of their families. Mothers who had not received an education themselves, reported that they were able to learn from their daughters.

Adapting indicators to changing objectives

Impact indicators only make sense when related to objectives. The objectives of a piece of work (a project, a set of activities, a programme) are what impact you hope to achieve; the impact indicators are the means by which you can show whether those objectives have been achieved.

The objectives for a project are decided at the outset, and it is often expected that indicators should also be decided in advance of doing the work; so an orthodox project proposal will include a set of indicators under the 'monitoring and evaluation' heading. However, we need to be cautious about this. Some overall indicators *do* need to be agreed in advance, but it is important also to allow for flexibility.

- As work progresses and participants gain practical experience, it is likely that new indicators will emerge that can be used to give more useful insights into changes in education quality.
- In some cases, defining indicators may be an integral part of the project itself, and therefore they should definitely not be pre-set. A variety of stakeholders (teachers, parents, children, etc) may be involved in this process of developing the indicators.

It may be that we are required by donors to produce indicators at the outset, as part of a funding proposal to get work started. However, we should not be afraid to change our indicators if they turn out not to be useful during monitoring and evaluation, or if we discover new ones. This is likely to be particularly true in emergency situations where the context is unstable and programmes need to respond to the changing situation — as objectives change, so indicators need to be reviewed and adapted. The important thing is to be clear about why they have been changed, and to incorporate the lessons learned into our planning.

Example 5 — children displaced by war in Sudan

Children displaced by war in Sudan have ended up in Khartoum slums, where there is no educational provision. The Khartoum authorities are not responsible for providing education for children from outside the province. SC UK obtained donor funding to support the displaced communities to set up their own schools. This included teachers' salaries in the short term, while trying to persuade the Khartoum authorities, through advocacy, to take over responsibility for teachers' salaries in the long term. This was stated in the original proposal as a programme objective to ensure sustainability. However, the advocacy strategy failed, and SC UK has had to revise its original objective and continue to provide teachers' salaries for humanitarian reasons, as the schools would otherwise cease to function. The reasons for this change have had to be explained, to persuade donors to continue funding the project.

Indicators as a framework for change

There are some strong advantages to the programme in having indicators jointly agreed early on, and clearly communicated, as these can provide a framework for making the changes which the project aims at.

In the following example from Sri Lanka, the agreed indicators were used during the life of the project in a similar way to objectives, to achieve systematic change which benefits children. Then later they were used again as an instrument for measuring the achievements of the project, alongside other evaluation methods. The example highlights many of the key processes in using indicators in education, so we describe it in some detail. The context is pre-school education, but the project's focus on improving teacher-child communication and developing active and interactive learning methods, has relevance for all education processes.

Example 6 — children's development in a conflict area in Sri Lanka

- *The context*

Trincomalee District is in the north east of Sri Lanka, an area heavily affected by conflict for 18 years. Traditional family and community structures have been undermined by war, displacement and the economic migration of key family members. Children were affected both directly and indirectly by conflict and displacement. They increasingly lived in female-headed households, and often shared responsibility for the care of younger siblings, as mothers worked outside the home.

In this context, the importance of early years provision in providing care, relief and stability is reflected by the many religious or community-based groups which have established over 300 early childhood care and development (ECCD) centres in Trincomalee. Until recently there was no infrastructure to monitor and support pre-schools, while teachers, (who were largely untrained and uneducated beyond secondary school), received little support. The pre-schools that were considered to be good models, featured children sitting on benches at long tables copying letters in small books. If there were any colourful things on the walls, they were teacher-produced charts or commercial posters.

- *The project*

SC UK became involved with the Ministry of Education in a project to improve the quality of education in these ECCD centres through sustainable teacher training. An international member of staff, with extensive ECCD experience, was brought in to provide this training.

With the support of the NGO and community sponsors of ECCD centres, twenty pre-school teachers were trained in a series of five residential sessions and many one-day workshops, over a period of two years. The training covered a range of topics aimed at helping teachers to understand the basics of child development and practical ways of responding to their educational and developmental needs. The training was carried out in an active and interactive way so that the teachers began to understand the importance of this learning approach.

Of the teachers trained, ten 'master teachers' were chosen (by their peers) and given further training, which enabled them to become mentors for other ECCD centres in the district. This involved working with three or four pre-school teachers close to their own school through exchange visits, facilitating one-day training workshops and evaluating progress in each school.

- *The teachers' indicators*

During the initial residential training, the teachers worked together to identify indicators of education quality, ie, how they would know if quality education

(Continued overleaf)

was being provided. After sharing ideas, teachers agreed on a list of indicators (see below). The indicators were developed and owned by the teachers themselves, and they were based on the teachers' knowledge of what it is possible to achieve in the resource-poor context of the Trincomalee ECCD centres. Nevertheless, the input of the consultant was crucial — drawing on her professional understanding of child development she was able to guide the teachers towards indicators which focused on the quality of children's learning experience, particularly the relationship between them and the teacher. Sometimes the teachers had not considered that their normal behaviour was an example of quality: 'I thought everyone smiled at children and tried to listen to them,' said one teacher from a village outside Trincomalee. The box on the next page shows some of the indicators chosen by the teachers

The teachers were asked to go back to school and assess their own work according to the indicators. When they found that they were not achieving all of them, they were motivated to make practical changes in the school and their teaching methods. Progress was reviewed in workshops over one year.

Some of the indicators of teaching quality developed by teachers in Trincomalee District pre-schools, North East Province, Sri Lanka

1. teacher listens attentively to children
2. teacher bends down to child's level and makes eye contact
3. teacher treats all children equally and with respect
4. pre-school is neatly organised with toys accessible to children
5. children's work is displayed at their eye level
6. the written daily schedule shows a balance of indoor and outdoor play, and quiet and noisy activities
7. four or more learning centres for individuals or small groups are set up and used during choice time. New learning centres are introduced on a regular basis
8. the teacher uses choice time to move from group to group and from child to child for brief conversations and positive encouragement
9. each child has a special place for his or her belongings
10. through the use of helpers and parent volunteers the child:adult ratio is at 15:1 or below
11. parents work in the pre-school on a regular basis and help support the pre-school in other ways
12. parent meetings are held at least every two months
13. information on each child's development is recorded
14. drinking water is available for children who do not bring their own
15. at the end of the session, the children and teacher replace materials in order.

(Continued overleaf)

- *The evaluation*

After two years, the original SC UK international staff member was called back to facilitate an evaluation of the impact of the training carried out by mentor teachers with other pre-school teachers. The teachers' indicators were used once again as reports, training records and monitoring visits were reviewed. They showed whether the changes had been achieved that the teachers had agreed would improve children's experience of pre-school — in other words, whether there had been changes in **teaching** (ie, the 'process').

In evaluating the overall impact of the project, it was also important to look at changes in children's **learning** (ie, the 'impact') — had there been a positive change in children's experience of pre-school? In order to answer this question the parents were consulted, and this phase of the evaluation would require a different set of indicators.

- *The parents' indicators*

Unlike the previous process, where teachers agreed a set of indicators and then monitored their work against them, for this phase of the evaluation a few 'open' questions were used to get parents to reflect on their child's progress. Their responses were then grouped according to categories. These categories had the same function as indicators (though they were never called indicators) in that they helped to summarise, analyse and quantify the impact of the project. In the same way that teachers had developed their own indicators with some outside guidance, parents were encouraged to produce these indicators within a framework set up by a professional facilitator.

Parents' views were sought through interviews, questionnaires and focus groups in selected pre-schools. They were asked to reflect on what their concerns had been for their children, and what changes they had noticed in them as a result of being in pre-school. One of the questions asked was: 'Describe your general feeling about your child's pre-school experience — for your child'. The 119 responses from parents in the focus groups were then organised (by the parents themselves) into 9 categories:

Responses	Number of parents
1. enjoys friends by helping, working and playing	22
2. demonstrates language development	15
3. acts happy, active and motivated for learning through play	15
4. takes responsibility for self and belongings	14
5. shows interest in creative activities (making things, drawing, dancing, acting, singing)	14
6. shows enthusiasm for going to school and learning	11
7. exhibits increased independence and confidence	10
8. shows improvement in eating and health habits	9
9. respects adults and shows good manners.	9

(Continued overleaf)

When the same question was put to parents through the questionnaire, a different set of categories was produced, but the concerns expressed by the parents (eg, 'child shows more independence' and 'child enjoys creative activities') were similar.

In addition to workshop activities designed to help parents express how they felt about their child's pre-school experience, they were asked to reflect on levels of distress which they had noticed in their child before and after the project to improve pre-schools. Unlike the open questions used before, the indicators used here were set by the facilitators: cards describing symptoms exhibited by children in distress (taken from a list drawn up by the Norwegian Save the Children¹) were placed on the floor. Parents were asked to put a coloured bean on each symptom that they had observed in their child before September 1999 (the start of the project), and another colour for each one that they had observed since. The significant decline in distress symptoms reported may of course be due to a range of factors, but the important thing is that parents view their children as having become less stressed.

During the four focus groups, parents not only provided useful information, but also enjoyed the activities, which were participatory and interactive. Finally, parents were asked to list the changes they had seen in their child and then group them according to physical development, social-emotional development, creative development and intellectual development. Most Sri Lanka parents would report that they send their children to pre-school for intellectual development, but when the question was approached in a different way, the highest number of responses was in the area of social-emotional development. A parent at one of the focus groups made the following comment: 'We are more aware of social-emotional development and maybe it is more important than we thought. Will social-emotional growth help to prepare children for primary schools?'

SECTION 3: CHOOSING INDICATORS

A great deal of time and anxiety is spent in trying to find the 'right' indicators to evaluate programmes. The process of defining indicators presents us with a number of questions and challenges, some of which we explore here.

Reliability or insight?

Indicators are a means of systematising judgements — they help us come to more reliable judgements than if we each simply reach our own conclusions. However, some individual judgements can be particularly insightful, and we do not want to miss the learning that they can offer us by making the indicators too rigid. In any particular case, there will have to be compromises between the two extremes.

Workshop tool 3 — SMART or SPICED indicators ?

These two tables summarise the characteristics of two different approaches to choosing indicators:

SMART indicators

Specific	What things does the project intend to change?
Measurable	Can the indicator be measured objectively and independently?
Attainable	Is it possible for the project to achieve the indicator?
Relevant	Is the indicator relevant to the project, and practical/cost-effective to use?
Timebound	When should the indicator be achieved by?

SPICED indicators

Subjective	Informants may have unique insights which give reliable information which is anecdotal but valuable.
Participatory	Indicators should be developed together with those best placed to assess them — this may be teachers, parents or children.
Interpreted and communicable	Indicators defined by local groups may need to be explained to external audiences.
Cross-checked	Check information by comparing different indicators or progress and using different informants and methods.
Empowering	The process of setting and using indicators should be empowering by helping groups and individuals reflect on their changing situation.
Diverse	Using indicators set by different groups, eg, men and women — information gathered should reflect these different perspectives.

- Which ones do you have experience of using?
- Which do you think would give the most useful information about whether education quality has improved?
- Could you combine them?
- In your own context, which characteristics would be the most challenging to use?

How many? How specific?

It is essential to keep indicators to a manageable minimum, while at the same time ensuring that they cover all the key areas in which we are seeking change. It may be helpful to select a small number of main indicators, each being supported by more detailed 'sub-indicators'.

Example 7 — breaking down sets of indicators

The UK based NGO, Learning for Life, supports a number of community education projects through partners in India and Pakistan. Discussion with partners during field visits identified that while systematic evaluation was taking place, the indicators were not producing information that helped to analyse the quality of education being provided. For example, project monitors were asked to rank children's reading skills as 'good', 'average' or 'poor' and the answers given were too general to be useful.

Nevertheless, the initial indicators had served to outline the areas that partners wanted to analyse:

- health, hygiene and surroundings
- record keeping
- teacher
- life skills (behaviour, confidence, interaction, knowledge of surroundings, etc)
- learning skills (reading, writing, arithmetic, listening, dependency on group/teacher)
- syllabus planning
- grouping of students.

The next step was to break down each of these areas into more detailed indicators. The list drawn up was long and complex, and the challenge was to find practical ways of using it during classroom observation. A series of classroom observation schedules was produced, each focusing on a different area, the aim being to focus on just one area during each observation session.

Qualitative or quantitative?

We often feel under pressure to demonstrate our achievements with statistics, particularly when evaluating for accountability purposes. There is a tendency to accept an argument if it is backed up by numbers, but the fact that you cannot count something does not mean that it is not important, particularly if you are trying to measure improvement in education quality. It is difficult, for example, to measure a loving, safe environment, but we know how important it is for children's development.

The fact that our focus here is on education quality does not mean that we are interested only in qualitative information. Quantitative information can be indicative of education quality, (eg, numbers of children dropping out), and numbers can also suggest other questions, for example, *why* are children dropping out? — it may be because of external factors or because quality is poor. Numbers can be particularly useful, then, if they are linked to qualitative information.

One way of communicating qualitative information in numbers is through a survey of attitudes. This is a way of taking opinions into account and turning them into statistics (eg, number of people who felt their children had gained in confidence). This way of presenting information may be useful (eg, for comparison between groups), but it may also hide the detail that may be essential for us to understand if we are to take action to improve education quality.

Sensitive to different groups?

The process of choosing and using indicators gives us a chance to find out about inequalities between different groups in society by highlighting the different challenges, needs and perspectives of groups which are often invisible, such as girls, ethnic minorities, and children with disabilities. It is important that we take this opportunity so that we, and the communities we work with, can recognise inequalities where they exist and find ways to address them.

These differences often come up during evaluations, even though they have not been planned for, for instance when exploring the reasons why children drop out of school, they may be different for boys (eg, going out to work) and girls (eg, caring for younger siblings). The flexibility to change and adapt indicators (as discussed above) allows us to incorporate these issues into our work as they emerge, but we should also find ways of building *sensitivity to difference* into project objectives and the way we select and use indicators.

What does this mean in practice? To give an example, if one of your indicators is 'increased interaction between teachers and students', and this is to be measured using classroom observation, it is important that the observer looks at *which*

students interact more with the teacher — are there more exchanges with boys than with girls? Or does the teacher tend to interact more with one social group than another? What about any children with disabilities?”

Do we need a baseline study?

A baseline study is a way of recording a picture ‘before’ and ‘after’ our intervention so that we can measure change. In some cases this can be helpful, but it can also be limiting. Change can be unexpected, and relying on indicators which were set on a baseline at the start of our programme can mean that we overlook important changes which we were not looking for. What is important is that people are given the chance to reflect, for example, ‘what changes have you noticed in the teacher/classes/children’s behaviour etc?’. In this way, valid and useful conclusions can be drawn without reference to a baseline study.

Who chooses the indicators?

All those involved in the education process can potentially be involved in choosing indicators, and a participatory approach to development suggests that it would be desirable for this to happen. The reality, however, may be more complicated, given that those involved probably have differing perceptions of what quality education is.

In Section 1 we talked of the necessity for us, within one organisation, to reach agreement on our understanding of quality education. As far as possible we try to base this on a professional body of global experience (and not just SC UK’s own experience) about what is good developmentally for children. However, many of the people we work with (education officials, teachers, parents and community leaders) may not share this understanding of children’s development. If they were asked to write a list of the things that would indicate improved education quality, it might look very different from our list.

How do we reconcile our values and professional aims with our belief in the importance of participation? If we are professionally convinced that certain changes are important for children’s education, and this view is not shared by our partners, clearly it is inappropriate simply to push our views regardless. It is equally inappropriate simply to accept our partners’ views without debate. The challenge is to set up processes within the programme that will enable us and our partners to come to a consensus on what is needed for children in this context. This should involve questions of how children develop, and the value of active learning. The resulting consensus will be reflected in the choice of indicators; but there may still be a need to include some on which agreement cannot be reached.

Example 8 — involving partners in choosing indicators

In our example from Sri Lanka, consensus was achieved through an external professional working with groups of teachers to develop indicators which were based on a shared understanding of child development (the consultant's input), but which were also practical and relevant in the local context (the teachers' input). It was not until changes had been made in the pre-schools that the community was asked to participate by reflecting on the changes they had seen in their children.

In our example from Colombia, on the other hand, the participation of children and young people is one of the central objectives of a project in which children identify their own indicators of education quality, and use these as a basis for improving education in their schools. This is appropriate and possible in a context where the schools participating in the project already have a tradition of children's participation through student councils.

Involving participants in selecting indicators, where this is practical and possible, can without doubt bring many added benefits, including an increased sense of ownership, insights into children's development and educational needs, and a better understanding of the project's approach and objectives. There are also risks, including raising expectations (eg, that any problems identified during evaluation will be met with increased funding), and the danger that those involved will feel that they are being judged, or that the security of their project depends on the findings of the evaluation.

Are we imposing our values?

Education is an area loaded with values and these differ widely across societies. One of the tensions in defining indicators of education quality is that we may feel that we could be imposing our (usually 'Western') values. We need to be honest about the fact that, as an international organisation, it is impossible to have a value-free intervention in education.

Our values are based on the UNCRC, which not only makes clear children's right to education, but also mandates us to promote *all* the rights of the child through education, as well as to challenge values and practices which may undermine those rights. We believe, for example, that girls should have the same educational opportunities as boys, although in some of the contexts in which we work this view is not shared. We also believe that children should not be beaten at school, but we know that corporal punishment is widespread and believed by some teachers and parents to be an effective educational tool.

Workshop tool 4 — values in education

The following statements from the UNCRC relate to education and represent the values which we promote. Which one presents the greatest challenge in your context?

- All rights apply to all children without discrimination on grounds of gender, disability, ethnicity, religion and citizenship.
- Children have a right to express opinions in any matter which concerns them.
- Styles of school discipline should reflect the child's human dignity.

SECTION 4: APPLYING INDICATORS

When developing indicators, it is vital to think about how they are to be used to gather information (and who is going to use them), as well as how that information is ultimately to be used. In this section we cover some of the points which should be considered when using indicators in the process of monitoring and evaluation.

Means of verification

A first step might be to think systematically through how you can verify each of the indicators selected. This was the approach taken recently in Burundi, where staff produced the following for a non-formal education programme in an emergency context:⁶

Example 9 — non-formal education in an emergency in Burundi	
Indicator	Means of verification
increased out-of-school student knowledge in core subjects	conduct pre- and post-test interviews with ten per cent of children before and after participation in programme
improved quality of class or group leadership	monthly evaluation of animators' records of daily lesson plans
increased youth participation and retention	monthly review of attendance book
existence of materials and equipment with use managed by the community	designation of community council member in charge of use/ inventory checks at the end of each month
establishment of regular meetings for the community leadership council	president of committee schedules meetings bi-monthly
percentage of parents contributing time to centre activities	animator records of parent participation

As the above example shows, it is more difficult to agree on an effective means of verification for some indicators than others: 'increased youth participation' lends itself to a quantitative means of verification, but 'improved quality of class or group leadership' demands more qualitative analysis. In this case, the means of verification (monthly evaluation of animators' records of daily lesson plans) is qualitative and depends on the subjective judgement of the evaluator. This example also highlights the limitations of linking each indicator to one practical 'means of verification'. While lesson plans may tell us much about the quality of class leadership, they do not tell us how the lesson was delivered or what the impact of content and teaching methods was on students' learning. What may be needed is a careful choice of further sub-indicators.

Qualitative indicators such as 'increase in student confidence' or 'level of self-esteem' are often included in evaluations of education quality, and verifying such indicators always presents a challenge. Qualitative evaluation approaches, where participants are asked to reflect more generally on change, and where their observations are then analysed (such as the review work with parents in our example from Sri Lanka) tend to produce more useful information. However, these approaches rely on the skills of the evaluator to analyse participants' responses, compare with other information, and draw conclusions about whether, and to what extent, the indicators have been met. This kind of approach is more common where evaluations are carried out for learning rather than accountability.

Who should use and verify the indicators?

The indicators may be used by different observers at different times during the project — this will depend on how the monitoring and evaluation are carried out, and it is something that should be considered when the indicators are chosen.

- *External*

Classroom observations, interviews, etc, can be carried out by an external professional, or by a non-specialist (project staff/community member) who would need to receive some training in advance. It is important to consider the observer's familiarity with, and sensitivity to, the context, as well as the potential for staff and students to feel threatened by the appearance of an external assessor in the school.

- *Teachers*

As the example from Sri Lanka shows, involving teachers in self-monitoring can be an effective way of raising awareness of quality issues and improving teaching skills. Peer monitoring by teachers can be less threatening to the observed teacher than a visit by an external professional assessor, while the teacher who observes may also learn a great deal from reflecting on his/her colleague's experience.

- *Community*

Parents, students and other community members can be involved in monitoring and evaluating education quality in a number of ways. In contexts where Parent Teacher Associations or Village Education Committees are well developed, it may be appropriate to involve community members in applying indicators directly through observation. It may be easier to involve parents and students through surveys, workshops or discussion groups (see the example from Sri Lanka) which may be directly linked to the indicators, but may be more informally organised to elicit unexpected reflections.

How long do we have to achieve impact?

The 'SMART' acronym (see Tool 3) demands that indicators should be 'timebound', and in some cases it may be useful and possible to set deadlines for achieving indicators, for example:

indicator of learning environment: *clean and tidy classroom with place for each child to store work*

to be achieved by: *end of this month.*

Other indicators do not lend themselves to deadlines so easily, particularly where they deal with things which can be achieved to a greater or lesser extent, eg, *improvement in student confidence.*

How often monitoring is carried out, and at what point progress is measured against indicators, are decisions which will be made as part of an overall monitoring and evaluation plan, and depend on external factors (such as reports to donors) as well as internal ones (such as resources and priorities). It is important to bear in mind, though, that failure to demonstrate impact in relation to a particular indicator does not mean that a project has failed, but rather that there may be other problems to be taken into account. Success also needs to be judged across the range of indicators that were chosen.

How do we apply the indicators?

As we have seen, indicators are a tool to be used in the wider process of monitoring and evaluation — but what are these processes? The following workshop tool list some approaches.

Workshop tool 5 — evaluation methods

There are a number of methodologies where indicators can be used to measure change in education quality. We list some of them here:

questionnaires/surveys interviews
workshops direct observation
small team approach PRA tools
rating systems triangulation.

- What do you understand by these terms?
- What other ones could you add to this list?
- Which would be appropriate in your context?

Can we measure change in education quality without indicators?

The indicator is only the starting point (what the word says — an indication) and we should not rely too heavily on it; we still have to exercise quite complex judgement. Where it is impossible to back things up with evidence (because conditions were so challenging or because it was impossible to gather information), we have to rely on judgement. This may mean using other methods of measuring what has been achieved.

In recent years, many practitioners have been experimenting with different ways of getting qualitative information about programme achievements, which do not rely on indicators alone.

It can be useful to balance non-structured methods, (such as workshops, focus groups, observation, anecdotes, etc), with more structured approaches involving indicators. In fact, this was very much the approach taken in Sri Lanka (see above example) where the views of parents were sought in an attempt to understand the impact that new teaching methods had on the experience of children in pre-schools. Their observations and concerns were then synthesised and grouped to form what was, in effect, a list of indicators. The process used reversed the orthodox approach of defining indicators and then seeking evidence of change, instead using evidence of change to define indicators.

What resources do we need?

When planning an evaluation and choosing indicators it is essential to consider what resources are needed and/or available. It may be possible to carry out simple surveys and 'tick list' evaluations with modest input in terms of training. However, more qualitative approaches (such as interviews, workshops, etc) will require more resources, in terms of time and the skills needed both to gather and interpret information.

There are significant trade-offs here, requiring difficult choices. Indicators that can be quickly and cheaply measured may give incomplete and misleading information about progress, leading to bad policy decisions. Equally, communities (as well as SC UK staff!) have little spare time for complex monitoring processes, which can be seen as a distraction from the activities that contribute directly to change. As ever, a balance needs to be struck, and the reasons for decisions taken need to be clear.

Using the Information

Whether the purpose of your evaluation is accountability or learning, what matters most is how well the information gathered is interpreted and what claims are made from it. Where information is mainly quantitative, the results may largely speak for themselves, but analysing and summarising qualitative information demands more skill.

As part of your overall planning process you should consider how results are to be presented and shared, for example, through a report (narrative or statistical) or a presentation or workshop. It is particularly important to feed back to local stakeholders (parents, teachers, students, local education officials). It is important not only to share the information widely, but to involve all partners and actors in analysing this information, particularly to derive specific lessons learned, to identify actions in response to those lessons, and crucially, to agree who will take responsibility for those actions. Where they have been involved in the process of evaluation, stakeholders will have greater ownership of the findings and it is more likely that the lessons learnt will be translated into practical action and policies to improve education quality.

Can we influence international policy by developing better ways of measuring education quality?

Many donors in the education sector currently focus on two international development targets:

- gender parity in access to education (by 2005)
- universal access to basic education (by 2015).

Neither of these targets has a quality dimension. This bias against quality improvements was compounded during the 1990s by the global assessments of developments in education, compiled by UNESCO for the Dakar World Education Forum in April 2000. Not only were the data collected on enrolments often wildly inaccurate, but they also covered up declining quality in many education systems — quality simply was not measured, because it is so difficult to measure.

Most donors and international organisations have now recognised the importance of improving quality, but few have much experience of measuring quality improvements in practice. One of the reasons that donors still focus on objectives which emphasise access at the expense of quality, is that quality improvements are difficult to fit within their traditional 'logical frameworks', which are indicator-driven.

There is now a significant demand from donors and UNESCO's Institute for Statistics for successful models of how to measure quality improvements in a straightforward way. Where the approaches outlined in this module are developed

in practice, this will considerably strengthen our advocacy with both donors and national governments. Alongside our advocacy on models for improving education quality, we will be able to demonstrate how donors and governments can be sure their investments in quality are bearing fruit. This is essential if education quality is to be a genuine priority within both national education plans and donors' funding decisions.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Save the Children UK publications

DFID and SC UK, *Towards Responsive Schools - Supporting Better Schooling for Disadvantaged Children*, DFID, London, 2000.

http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/development/global_pub/index.htm

Gosling, L. *Toolkits: A practical guide to assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation*, Development Manual 5, SC UK, London, 1995.

http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/functions/indx_pubs.html

Webb, D and Elliott, L., *Learning to Live: Monitoring and evaluating HIV/AIDS programmes for young people*, SC UK, DFID and UNAIDS, 2000.

http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/development/global_pub/index.htm

Save the Children UK internal documents

"Indicators of Quality", SCF/Tricomalee District Pre-schools, Northern Province, Sri Lanka/ECD Unit, NEP Ministry of Education

Quality indicators devised for use at pre-schools, in English and local languages, with pictures. Good example of how to approach challenge of devising simple and relevant quality indicators.

Mojica, R. "Participation of Children and Young People in the Formulation of Indicators of Educational Quality for the Design, Implementation and Evaluation of Policies in Colombia", SC UK, 2000

Project description in English

Molteno, M, Elliott, L and Stubbs, S, "Impact Indicators that Work for People", SC UK, 1995

Notes for SC UK staff supporting programmes which work through change in awareness, attitudes and behaviour.

Omidian, P, "Impact of SC Child-Focused Health Education Project: Effects on children's self-esteem and status in the family", SC UK Afghanistan Office, Peshawar, Pakistan, 2000

SC UK, "Community Based Decentralised Child-Centred Education Management Information System (C-Emis) for Surkhet (Nepal)", SCF Project Proposal, February 2000

These documents are all available electronically from
www.savethechildren.org.uk/development

External publications and documents

SIDH, "A Matter of Quality. A study of people's perceptions and expectations from schooling in rural and urban areas of Uttarakhand", Research paper produced by Sanshodhan Research and Advocacy Wing, SIDH, 2000

Research into parents'/community perceptions of education purpose and quality, analysing difference by sex, income and urbanisation. Concludes with strong argument for decentralisation and greater community input to improve education quality and introduce relevant traditional skills and local knowledge into the curriculum.

<http://www.sidh.org/research.html#mog>

Chinapah, V. "Quality Education for All. The Monitoring Learning Achieving Project (MLA) Designs, Processes, Findings and Policy Implications", Jan 2001

Summary of process, tools and indicators used in this project to assess learning achievement in a number of countries. Focus on learning rather than wider impact of education, ie, whether what is learnt is useful. Useful list at end of lessons learned and major challenges.

<http://upo.unesco.org/bookdetails.asp?id=1460>

Ponce Veritz, M. "Education quality indicators based on the needs of children and adolescents", Foro Educativo (Educational Forum), 1997

Critical summary of the education quality indicators developed by Foro Educativo

Roche, C. *Impact Assessment for Development Agencies – Learning to value change*, Development Guidelines, Oxfam Publications, 1999

www.oxfam.org.uk

SC UK Development Manual *Toolkits*

¹ From *Defining Quality in Education*. UNICEF Education Section Working Paper, June 2000.

² See modules on community and child participation, which explore the importance of participation in improving education quality.

³ Adapted from a table in Foresti, M, "Evaluation: purposes, objects, context, timing", SC UK internal paper, February 2001, (Adapted from Cracknell, 2000).

⁴ More detailed guidance and examples regarding gender sensitivity can be found in the *Guidelines for Implementing the Save the Children Alliance Gender Equity Policy*.

⁵ Nicolai, S. "Children's Monitoring & Evaluation Plan", International Red Cross, Burundi, 2000.