



Using Personalised Feedback to Improve Early Learning Programme Quality

Dr Caylee Cook

Research Manager, DataDrive2030.

Overview

Can relatively light-touch feedback improve the quality of early learning programmes?

Improving the quality of early learning programmes (ELPs) remains one of the most important levers for strengthening child outcomes. While intensive coaching and mentoring models are important approaches to quality improvement, many unsupported ELPs have limited access to this type of ongoing support. This pilot project explored whether structured observation data and personalised feedback alone could contribute to measurable improvements in programme quality within unsupported ELPs.

Findings suggest that structured classroom observations combined with personalised reports and in-person feedback can lead to meaningful improvements in programme quality within just five months. Importantly, improvements were observed across programmes with varying levels of resources, experience, and qualifications, suggesting that the potential for change is not limited to a particular type of centre.

Introducing the Learning Programme Quality Assessment

The LPQA (v2) is a standardised classroom observation tool designed to measure the quality of early learning programmes for children aged 3–5 years. The LPQA assesses 22 observable indicators across five domains and generates classroom-level reports highlighting strengths and areas for improvement.

The LPQA assesses five domains:



Materials and equipment: Availability, accessibility, and developmental appropriateness of learning materials and resources.



Planning and assessment: Structured planning, child observation, progress tracking, and alignment with curriculum frameworks.



Learning programme: Quality of the daily programme, including literacy, numeracy, group activities, and free play.



Teaching strategies: Classroom organisation and teaching practices that support independence, thinking, and learning.



Relationships and interactions: Quality of interactions between teachers and children, peer interactions, and approaches to discipline.

Results are presented on a 3-point scale:

Inadequate: Practices requiring substantial improvement

Basic: Some quality practices are present, though inconsistently implemented

Good: Quality practices are consistently evident across the programme

Using the LPQA as an “Assessment for Improvement” Tool

The pilot positioned assessment not as a compliance exercise, but as a tool for reflection, learning, and improvement. More specifically, we explored whether structured observation data, paired with a personalised report and an in-person feedback session with the assessor, could help principals and teachers improve the quality of ELPs. The approach aimed to support programme quality improvement by:

- Helping principals and practitioners understand what quality looks like in practice.
- Providing clear, actionable feedback linked to observed classroom practice.
- Encouraging self-reflection and accountability.
- Supporting data-driven decision-making at programme level.

How the pilot project worked

A total of 147 ELPs participated in both baseline and endline LPQA observations (approximately 5 months apart), conducted by trained assessors.

The intervention process included:

Baseline LPQA:

Trained assessors observed classroom practice and programme quality across five domains.

Personalised feedback and report handover:

Each principal received a personalised report highlighting strengths, areas for improvement (according to the Good, Basic, and Inadequate rating categories), and practical recommendations. Assessors met with principals in-person to explain the report, answer questions about the findings, and guide them through how to interpret the findings. Assessors did not provide coaching or curriculum advice, but focused on supporting the principals to interpret their reports.

Endline LPQA:

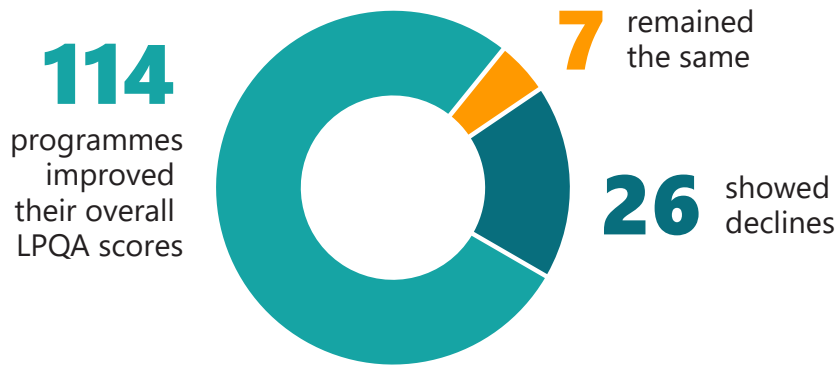
Follow-up assessment approximately five months later. Programmes were reassessed using the same tool to examine whether quality had changed over time. Assessors followed the same personalised feedback and report handover with the endline reports.

Key Findings

Significant improvements in programme quality

The results showed clear and consistent gains in overall programme quality across all five domains.

Out of the 147 programmes assessed at both time points:



In terms of the rating shifts, the most notable movement in overall quality ratings was from Basic to Good (40 centres), contributing to an increase in the proportion rated Good from 32% at baseline to 59% at endline. This suggests that it may be easier to drive improvements if the basics are already in place.

The figures below show the percentage of each rating for the total LPQA and for each domain at baseline (figure 1) and at endline (figure 2).

Figure 1:
Baseline LPQA ratings for total and domains

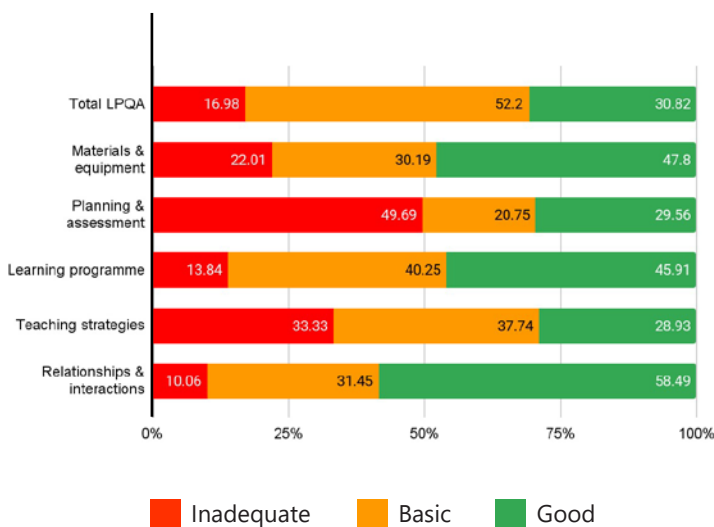
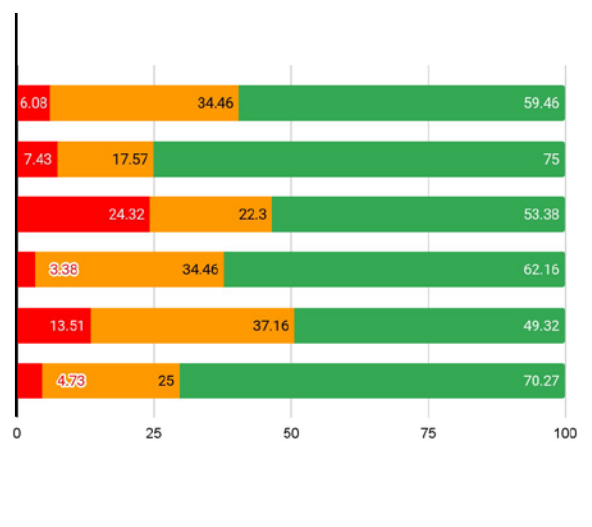


Figure 2:
Endline LPQA ratings for total and domains



Paired statistical tests confirmed that the improvements in scores observed between baseline and endline were statistically significant. Total LPQA scores increased by an average of 8.68 percentage points ($p < 0.001$), with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.83$). Significant improvements were also observed across all five LPQA domains.

Figure 3 below shows the magnitude of improvement in total and domain percentage scores from baseline to endline; the steeper the line, the greater the change between baseline and endline observations.

Figure 3: Change in average percentage scores from baseline to endline

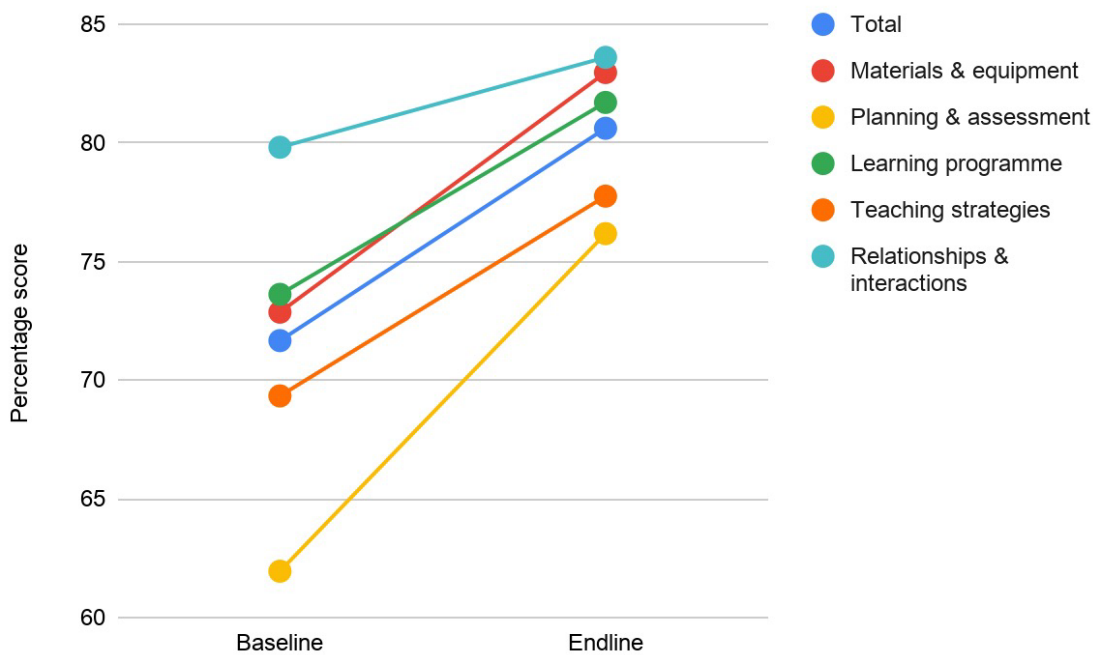


Figure 3 shows that the largest improvements were seen in:

- Planning and assessment (average change = 13.61 percentage points; $p < 0.001$)
- Materials and equipment (average change = 9.66 percentage points; $p < 0.001$)

Moderate but statistically significant improvements were also found in:

- Learning programme
- Teaching strategies
- Relationships and interactions

Additional analyses were conducted to test whether the findings could be explained by external factors. These included ELP dropout, assessor differences between rounds, programme disruptions, or additional funding received during the project period. No evidence was found that these factors significantly influenced the observed improvements, strengthening confidence that the changes reflected genuine shifts in programme quality.

Why Did the Feedback Process Matter?

Although principals were often familiar with general concepts of quality, the assessment and feedback process helped translate abstract ideas into concrete, observable practices. Qualitative interviews with principals revealed that the assessment process acted as a reminder and motivator rather than a judgement.

The LPQA reports gave principals:

- Clear descriptions of strengths and gaps
- Practical examples of improvement strategies
- A framework for reflection and discussion with staff

Importantly, assessors did not act as curriculum coaches or mentors. Their role was to support principals in understanding the findings and practical guidance already contained in the report. To prepare for this role, assessors received extensive training on the feedback and report handover process. This included confidentiality training, role-playing exercises, and guidance on handling sensitive conversations.

In interviews with the assessors, the importance of trust and supportive engagement was highlighted.



Assessors reported that **principals were initially cautious of the assessment process, but attitudes shifted when the process was experienced as developmental rather than punitive.**

The tone and framing of feedback mattered significantly:

- Reports focused on improvement rather than judgement
- Language was intentionally developmental
- In-person feedback sessions created opportunities for dialogue and clarification

This suggests that how feedback is delivered can shape whether principals engage positively with the process.

Improvement Was Possible Across Different Types of Programmes

One of the most important findings was that **improvement was not limited to better-resourced or more experienced programmes**. Although programme fees, practitioner experience, and teacher continuity were modestly associated with higher overall quality scores, none of these factors predicted whether programmes improved over time. This suggests that improvement is possible across a wide range of contexts.

Persistent Barriers to Quality Improvement

Despite improvements, principals identified persistent barriers to quality improvement including:

- financial constraints,
- inadequate infrastructure,
- limited practitioner training,
- staff turnover,
- and difficulty accessing external support organisations.

These findings suggest that while feedback and reflection can support improvement, sustained quality enhancement requires broader ecosystem support.

Key lessons for Organisations Supporting Early Learning Programmes

1. Assessment can support improvement: Classroom observations using a standardised tool with personalised, in-person feedback can encourage reflection, accountability, and programme-level action.

2. Feedback processes matter: Supportive, non-punitive report handovers by well trained assessors helped principals engage meaningfully with findings and identify practical next steps.

3. Feedback alone is insufficient: While many programmes improved without intensive coaching or access to additional resources, sustained quality improvement still requires access to training, mentorship, infrastructure investment, financing and resourcing, and broader support systems.

4. Empowerment over compliance: The findings also reinforce that quality improvement should not be framed solely as compliance or inspection. When assessment processes centre learning, reflection, and empowerment, they can create meaningful opportunities for change.

Conclusion

This pilot provides encouraging evidence that structured observation data, paired with personalised reporting and guided interpretation, can contribute to measurable improvements in ELP quality.

Improvement was observed across programmes with different levels of resources, experience, and qualifications. This suggests that meaningful change is possible across many different types of centres. However, the findings also highlight that sustained or further improvements, particularly in highly resource-constrained environments, are likely to require broader system support, including funding, infrastructure, practitioner development, and ongoing quality support mechanisms. Many ELPs continue to operate under significant financial and operational pressures, often while balancing competing priorities linked to compliance, staffing, and day-to-day programme sustainability.

