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European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Working Group



Peer Learning Activity

How to involve stakeholders in monitoring and evaluation processes to increase inclusiveness of ECEC systems?

24-26 April 2023

Vilnius, Lithuania

SUMMARY

Questions related to this Peer Learning Activity can be addressed to
EAC-WG-ON-ECEC@ec.europa.eu.

The Peer Learning Activity (PLA) was hosted jointly by the European Commission and the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in collaboration with the National Agency for Education. The PLA was attended by members of the [European Education Area Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care \(ECEC\)](#) representing Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Türkiye, as well as a range of international organisations and stakeholders including the Alliance for Childhood, EASPD, EPSU, ETUCE, Eurydice, UNICEF, and Iscte-University Institute of Lisbon.

Attendees discussed the topic of how to involve stakeholders (children, families, staff, and external stakeholders) in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes to increase the inclusiveness and quality of ECEC systems.

The PLA provided an opportunity to unpack key issues around improving the inclusiveness of ECEC systems. Following an introduction to the various stakeholders involved in Lithuanian ECEC and a round-table with all participants, hosts and attendees discussed Lithuania's pilot of an evaluation system for preschool institutions that shifts the focus away from "evaluation as inspection" towards "evaluation as an opportunity for development". The PLA brought to light the need to create a cultural shift around evaluations: to create an environment for safe and meaningful participation for all those concerned by the evaluation (with special attention to those with quieter voices), to foster a belief in the value that evaluations can bring, and a supportive framework (at school, local, and national levels) to implement the improvements raised by evaluations. Attendees also learned about approaches to including stakeholders that are challenging to meaningfully involve in monitoring and evaluation, such as young children, and children with special needs or disabilities.

These issues were explored through a range of in-depth case studies spanning the first and second days of the PLA, including presentations from Estonia, Norway, Finland, EPSU, ETUCE, EASPD, and the PARTICIPA project at the Iscte-University Institute of Lisbon. Discussions were also complemented with site visits to ECEC centres around Vilnius, including visits to a University nursery-kindergarten, an outdoor kindergarten, a regular public kindergarten, a special needs kindergarten, and a kindergarten for Lithuanian children and national minorities. Conclusions were then drawn by the group on the third morning of the PLA through a World Café consultation exercise focusing on four central questions:

[What are the conditions to meaningfully involve children in M&E processes for quality ECEC?](#)

PLA attendees concluded that certain conditions are needed to make children's participation in M&E feasible for staff: staff should perceive that involving children is worthwhile from a pedagogical point of view, and not just an obligation. Secondly, a certain degree of autonomy should be granted to each setting to decide how children's involvement in evaluation processes is pursued.

Starting from these foundations, the PLA participants pointed out the essential preconditions that are needed to involve children in M&E processes:

- Children's participation should not be limited to M&E processes, but linked to their participation in educational decision-making processes on an everyday basis. The group discussed different approaches to how this child participation in decision-making can be embedded in everyday practices (e.g. child initiated play and project-based learning)

- An atmosphere of trust and reciprocity between adults and children needs to be created: children should feel free to express their views and feel confident that their views will be considered.

Children's views should be embedded systematically in the planning and evaluation of daily activities using methods such as: observation; reflections on child drawings; and engaging in conversation with children.

When making choices about the tools that could be used to gather children's views, one should be mindful of children's diverse backgrounds and abilities, to counteract the risk of un-equal participation. With a view to ensure equal participation to all children, the tools adopted for gathering children's view should be: age appropriate; culturally sensitive; and diversified in relation to children's language and abilities (both verbal and non-verbal).

Finally, the essential condition for the inclusion of all children to meaningfully happen is that teachers have the necessary competences. This can be achieved through: in-service training and CPD; coaching and guidance by pedagogical leadership; and adequate working conditions for staff to make children's participation in evaluation and planning processes sustainable over time.

What are the conditions to meaningfully involve families in M&E processes for quality ECEC?

PLA participants agreed that it is crucial to build positive relationships based on trust. Parents often do not know the mission of ECEC, they do not read the educational program or plans, so they would need to be informed about the processes and benefits of evaluations.

There are a range of challenges when it comes to this stakeholder group, because families are not a homogenous group, and they have a variety of conflicting views and (sometimes unrealistic) expectations for ECEC. Moreover, often louder voices overshadow the quieter ones. It is important to include and hear everyone, although sometimes this might require creative solutions to create a welcoming participatory environment to share views.

Another important point mentioned was that staff should be trained in ways to communicate with parents, and understand the importance of involving them.

Some ways to connect with parents were discussed, such as: billboards with plans, photos or results of activities can be used to inform parents about the daily life in the ECEC centre; parent surveys (crucially – these should not be designed as satisfaction surveys - parents need to understand the purpose, and the language needs to be clear, accessible, and meaningful for parents); information-type meetings or briefings about child development, curriculum, and the purpose of ECEC; digital tools for communication; home visits (conducted in a sensitive way); and also parent representation on school boards. Finally, evaluations should be child-focused rather than institution-focused.

What are the conditions to meaningfully involve staff in M&E processes for quality ECEC?

The group concluded that one of the key conditions to meaningfully involve staff is that they believe in the purpose and benefits (for themselves, for children, and for the ECEC setting) of monitoring and evaluation. There also has to be a culture of evaluation that is embedded into daily practices. Also, there

should be a culture of embracing change and development, following evaluations. For these cultural shifts, pre-service and in-service staff training is essential, in the direction that teachers feel equipped to be inquiry-based teachers and researcher-teachers.

Moreover, there has to be the feeling and knowledge that staff opinions are appreciated. This is also linked to the key point about embracing and protecting critical opinions. An important ingredient here is also trust. Whistle-blowers should be protected, and there should be no punishments for speaking out.

It is also important that there is follow-up after staff voices are heard. There needs to be clear communication about “what happens next”. Evaluation needs to, in this way, be framed as a process. Finally, there needs to be support to use the results that are produced, and support to enact changes following the evaluation.

One of the most prominent conditions to meaningfully involve staff in M&E processes is staff time. Staff need to have availabilities to participate in M&E, and they need to be supported by team leaders as well as by parents, to take this time. In this way, it is important for the broader community to value M&E. Lastly, it can also help to recognize good practices where staff are meaningfully involved in M&E.

What are the conditions to meaningfully involve stakeholders in M&E processes for quality ECEC?

PLA participants concluded that there are a broad range of stakeholders who could be involved in monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC, such as representatives from: other ministries than those in charge of ECEC; national agencies; local authorities; ECEC employers; universities and researchers; civil society and NGOs, teacher training institutions, primary schools, and even the media or journalists (in a whistle-blowing role).

Participants discussed that there should be a consensus between all actors involved on the purposes of the M&E activities (e.g. it should not be about ranking and expectations should be managed adequately), and what should be evaluated.

The involvement of stakeholders should be done through a well-managed participatory process. All relevant stakeholders should be consulted and heard – as appropriate depending on the context and purpose of the exercise, with the understanding that policy or decision makers will make the final decisions.

As the range of stakeholders to be potentially involved can be very wide, it is important to have a clear line on who shall be involved and why, especially when it comes to involve civil society. The choice should be guided by principles including: prioritising the best interest of the child; expertise in ECEC / specificities of early childhood; democratic and transparent processes. There should be a strategy in place to identify and manage risks of involving external key stakeholders and ensuring the smallest / most excluded actors are involved meaningfully.

Stakeholders must be aware of their role and added value, and there should be clear rules of engagement (trust and confidentiality). Stakeholders should be given reasonable deadlines to give their contributions, and an adequate budget must be set aside to fund meetings, online surveys, communication activities, and training.