



European Education Area Strategic Framework **Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**

Monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC:

Purposes, values and principles – Executive Summary



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Monitoring and evaluating quality of early childhood education and care in Europe

Purposes, values and principles

Executive Summary

The whole report is available in English at
<https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/ECEC+Documents>

This publication is the first report of the current Working Group (WG) on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which was established in 2021 as part of a new generation of WGs under the Commission's Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (EEA communication, 30 September 2020),¹ as well as the Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and Beyond (Resolution, 18 February 2021).²

Under the current mandate, the main thematic focus of the ECEC WG is on the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of quality in ECEC, with a key emphasis on the three topic areas of 1) the **purposes and values** that should underpin the design of M&E processes, 2) the best ways to **coordinate and streamline M&E processes** across **centre and system levels**, and 3) the benefits of, and best practices for, **engaging children, parents, and other stakeholders** in M&E processes. This first report addresses the ECEC WG's first main topic by answering the following Key Questions:

- **KQ 1.1:** What are the possible main purposes (objectives) of M&E of quality in ECEC?
- **KQ 1.2:** What are the values which can/should underpin M&E of quality in ECEC, and how can they be included in M&E processes?

To answer these key questions, this main content of this report is structured into three consecutive parts:

- First, the section on **purposes of M&E** (see section 3.0) provides:
 - an overview of the wide range of possible **objectives** that M&E processes may be designed and implemented to achieve,
 - an exploration of the WG's views on the purposes that M&E of ECEC quality should strive to fulfil in order to maximise positive impact.
- Secondly, **the values that should guide ECEC quality provision as well as monitoring and evaluation processes** are made explicit (see section 4.0), with specific reference to a clear image and voice of the child, the inextricability of education and care, inclusiveness, families' participation and the vision of ECEC as a public good.
- Thirdly, the section on **principles leading M&E of ECEC and how to embed them in M&E processes** (see section 5.0) explores the many potential values and principles that may guide the M&E of ECEC, and discusses which of these values should be embedded in M&E processes. It also offers suggestions for how best to ensure that these principles are present in M&E processes, both in general terms and in relation to each of the specific principles.
- Finally, the section on **unintended negative effects of M&E and how to avoid them** (see section 6.0) describes the many ways in which M&E processes can cause harm, particularly in contexts where the tools, activities, and approach of the M&E system are not aligned with its main purposes, principles, and values. This is followed by suggestions on how best to anticipate and prevent these potential pitfalls.

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625&from=EN>

² Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48584/st06289-re01-en21.pdf>

Purposes of M&E in ECEC

Institutions in charge of organising, funding, and delivering ECEC may design M&E processes with the intention of fulfilling a broad range of purposes. Such purposes can largely be divided according to the priorities of **quality control**, **quality improvement**, and **policy learning**. These categories, however, should be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive, as in practice M&E systems are designed to fulfil several purposes simultaneously, albeit to varying degrees.

- The purpose of **quality control** is to ensure that ECEC provision adheres to mandatory national and sub-national quality standards or legislation. Quality standards may be enforced by offering accreditation and/or public subsidies to compliant ECEC settings, by facilitating public accountability through the publication of M&E results, and by implementing sanctions or rewards to under- or highly-performing ECEC centres respectively.
- The purpose of **quality improvement** beyond quality control is to support continuous reflection and developments towards better quality in ECEC settings, with the distal goal to achieve consistency across ECEC settings and ensure equality of educational opportunities. This may be accomplished through the use of M&E results to identify regional and local disparities in quality and mobilise targeted support and/or funding at the system level, as well as by supporting quality improvement at the centre-level through staff support and continuous professional development.

M&E may also function to **foster democratic participation of children and parents** in their ECEC provision by directly consulting them on their views and experiences, **guide policy learning, policy reforms and initiatives** through the creation of evidence on strengths and weaknesses in the ECEC system, and **benefit advocacy** by creating evidence that stakeholders, researchers, parents and the media may use to hold policymakers and other stakeholders in ECEC accountable.

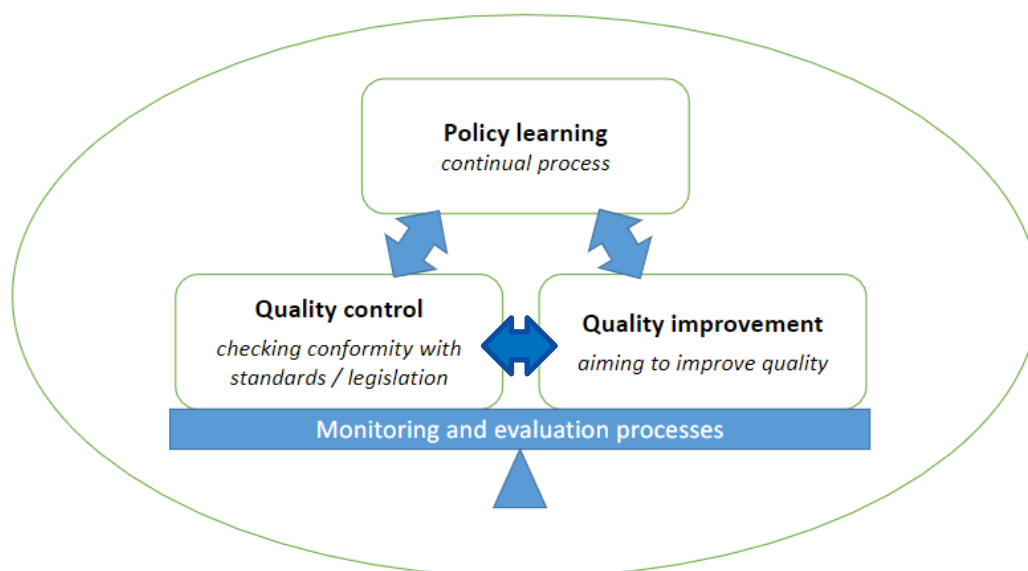
While quality control, quality improvement, and policy learning are all critical and important purposes to be fulfilled by M&E, ***the WG suggests that M&E processes for assessing quality in ECEC strive for a proportionate emphasis on quality improvement and quality control as opposed to an over-emphasis on quality control.*** Such a balance would help to link M&E to concrete positive impacts, increase sense of purpose and motivation among staff, and shift M&E from an emphasis on adhering to minimum quality standards to an emphasis on striving to constantly improve ECEC policies – as well as pedagogical practices enacted in ECEC settings – for achieving an ever-higher quality for the benefit of children.

In this sense, M&E processes should avoid being reductive and ensure that ECEC quality is addressed in a comprehensive way, acknowledging multiple dimensions connected both to structural quality (e.g. staff:child ratio, group size, educational environment³) and to process quality (e.g. staff-child interaction, pedagogical practices).

It is also suggested that M&E processes should not only provide relevant information on the quality of practice enacted in individual settings, but also on the systemic conditions within which ECEC settings are embedded, in order to identify and address shortcomings in existing policies and governance arrangements. In fact, if the primary aim **is to ensure**

³ As a component of structural quality, the educational environment refers to the quality of buildings, facilities and materials.

the highest possible quality of ECEC services for all children, M&E systems should be designed and implemented by engaging policy-makers and all relevant stakeholders – such as public and private providers, trade unions, advocacy groups representatives, as well as professionals, children and families – in the process of defining what quality is and how it could be improved by committing to children’s **best interests**. In turn, **fostering the democratic participation** of children, families, professionals and community stakeholders in decision-making processes will ensure that quality of ECEC provision is evaluated – and constantly improved - in relation to the needs of local contexts where settings are placed, rather than assessed according to predefined outcomes to be achieved. M&E practices that take into account the quality of children’s and families’ experiences in ECEC services might also contribute to increase their **agency and voice** in policy decision-making processes, thus fostering the improvement of policies from a bottom-up perspective. At the same time, from a more top-down perspective, the data collected through M&E can provide policy-makers with relevant information on the effectiveness of policy measures undertaken at local, regional or even national level, thus supporting their role in developing more effective policies as well as in addressing implementation gaps.



Values guiding the monitoring and evaluation of ECEC quality: the European Quality Framework as shared reference

Starting from the acknowledgement that the process of defining quality is influenced by the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders engaged in ECEC provision in each context – children, parents, ECEC service providers, ECEC staff, local communities and policy-makers – the WG identified the need of defining a shared value-base framing the understanding of quality ECEC at European level. From this perspective, shared values may serve as a common frame of reference orienting Member States in the process of laying the foundation for national-, regional-, and local- level definitions of quality underlying M&E practice in ECEC. **A consensus emerged in the WG that the underlying values of ECEC, as stated in the European Quality Framework, should guide all M&E activities extending from the European to the national/regional/local level, and down to the level of pedagogical practice.**

The underlying values of ECEC quality M&E reported in the following paragraphs are drawing on the key values of ECEC expressed in the European Quality Framework (pp. 9-10), which have been further elaborated and expanded by the WG.

A clear image and voice of the child and childhood should be valued

Each child is unique and a competent and active learner whose potential needs to be encouraged and supported. The child is a co-creator of knowledge who needs and wants interaction with other children and adults. As citizens of Europe, children have their own rights which include early education and care. ECEC services need to be child-centred, acknowledge children's views and actively involve children in everyday decisions in the ECEC setting.

Education and care as intertwined aspects of early childhood pedagogy

Services should offer a nurturing and caring environment and provide a social, cultural and physical space with a range of possibilities for children to develop their present and future potential. ECEC is designed to offer a holistic approach based on the fundamental assumption that education and care are inseparable.

ECEC quality lies in staff professionalism and wellbeing

The work of early childhood education and care professionals has a long lasting impact on children's lives. Initial professional preparation and in-service development – along with ongoing pedagogical support provided on the job – are key to ensure high quality practices as well as staff wellbeing. To fulfil their professional role in supporting children and their families, ECEC staff require not only complex knowledge and competences related to early childhood pedagogy but also a competent system sustaining them in the process of reflecting on – and improving – their everyday practice.

Parents are the most important partners and their participation is essential

The family is the first and most important place for children to grow and develop, therefore parents should be fully involved in all aspects of education and care for their child. To make this involvement a reality, ECEC services should be designed in partnership with families and parent-professional relationships should be based on trust and mutual respect.

Inclusiveness

Children and families are characterised by great social, socio-economic, cultural and religious diversity, and this diversity should be respected as a fundamental element of European societies. ECEC services can promote the creation of a more inclusive and cohesive society by providing additional opportunities to children coming from societally disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs, as well as providing support to parents from vulnerable and/or marginalised groups.

A vision of ECEC as a public good

Bringing together education and care should not be limited to pedagogical approaches in ECEC settings, but should extend beyond the walls of institutions and organisations that are responsible for children's education and wellbeing in the community. This implies the creation of participatory alliances among stakeholders that are based on a shared

understanding of quality and a shared commitment to ongoing quality improvement for the benefits of children, families, professionals and society at large.

Designing M&E systems in a value-driven way can ensure that M&E processes are optimised to meet their goals in two ways:

- by making explicit the reference framework orienting M&E activities – and thus better enabling all components of the M&E to be designed intentionally and coherently; and
- by shifting the focus from the immediate outputs of M&E activities (for example collecting and publishing data) to the overarching and longer-term objectives of M&E (for example securing educational equity and fulfilling children’s rights).

The ECEC WG advises addressing the gap that may persist between the values underpinning ECEC practices and their presence in M&E processes.

In an ECEC system that values inclusion of all children, for instance, M&E processes should aim to:

- collect data on the inclusiveness of ECEC settings (for instance by tracking statistics on the representation of disadvantaged groups among attending children or assessing the extent to which all children are engaged in ECEC activities); and
- ensure that the M&E process considers the views and experiences of all children, while also using M&E tools and activities that are appropriate and accessible for all children including those with special needs and/or other disabilities.

Principles leading M&E of Quality in ECEC

To ensure that values are coherently embedded in M&E systems, a range of general initiatives can be taken. These include:

- clearly and explicitly defining the guiding principles of an M&E approach in curricular frameworks or legislation,
- ensuring that the governance system responsible for M&E of ECEC is conscious and committed to such principles,
- designing and implementing relevant tools, activities, and processes that consistently align principles and practice.

In light of the value framework reported in the previous section, the ECEC WG proposes six principles to guide the design and implementation of M&E processes, as summarised in table 1 below).

Table 1 – Guiding principles to design processes for M&E of quality in ECEC

Guiding Principles	Definition	Suggestions for their integration in M&E processes
Democratic & Participatory	M&E is a collaborative process which values the inputs and perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders including ECEC providers, ECEC staff, parents, and children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid relying exclusively on objective measures through external evaluations; • Include self-evaluation approaches, allowing ECEC service providers to be actively engaged in M&E processes while valuing perceptions of staff, parents and children.
Accountable & Transparent	A key priority of M&E is to ensure clear roles and responsibilities of all actors involved, as well as to prove that data are acted upon (<i>accountable</i>). Ensuring that evaluation processes are 'readable' for all actors involved, including families, increases their awareness and agency, thus nurturing a shared culture of ECEC quality (<i>transparency</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a shared and well-defined understanding of ECEC quality among all stakeholders from ECEC providers to families (for example through a national pedagogical, curricular or quality framework) • Develop a set of indicators and benchmarks through which ECEC quality can be monitored and progression in quality improvement can be tracked. • Maintain transparency not only in the way that the results of M&E are used, but also in the tools and methods used to generate these results.
Impactful & Supportive	M&E processes should support ECEC professionals to systematically document, reflect upon and review their practices from a quality enhancement perspective. M&E approaches that are appreciative of staff professionalism can contribute significantly to enhancing their competences and sense of purpose, with positive effects on their professional well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce M&E results that are relevant and useable for the stakeholders involved in decision-making around ECEC services, and encourage staff self-reflection on their everyday practice. • Operationally link the M&E results to targeted funding and/or support mechanisms to enhance quality of ECEC provision through continuing professional development and coaching initiatives
Holistic & Inclusive	M&E gives equal priority to the full spectrum of children's wellbeing, including not only their educational development but also their wellbeing and social relationships. ECEC should emphasise children's all-round development while also seeing them as competent human beings and active learners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the quality of M&E according to an appropriately broad and multidimensional understanding of what 'quality' is, taking a holistic view of children's needs and potentialities, learning, growth and development. • Use M&E tools that take into account the views and experiences of all children and families in a meaningful way such as, for example, pedagogical documentation
Contextualised & Responsive	ECEC provision should be adaptive to the needs of the individual communities, settings,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and enable M&E processes to accommodate variation in pedagogical

	children and families they serve (for instance in cases where children have specific educational, psychosocial or developmental needs); practices may therefore vary while still being aligned with quality requirements at system level.	practices and approaches. Ideally include some mechanisms, such as a national-level database or platform, to ensure that de-centralised M&E results can be streamlined at the centralised level and yield relevant macro-level findings of use for policymakers.
Equitable and Consistent	All children have an equal right to quality ECEC (as defined by a curricular or quality framework), therefore a key priority is to ensure that services are held accountable for providing quality ECEC to the children, families and communities they serve. M&E strives to ensure that regardless of variations in pedagogical approaches or practices across centres, the learning environment provides all children with equal access to high quality educational opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use M&E tools that generate comparable data and results, based on a shared, research-based, and well-defined understanding of ECEC quality, in order to identify gaps and areas for improvement • Ensure that all services comply with mandatory quality standards, while developing and implementing quality enhancement initiatives aimed at addressing the above-mentioned gaps and area for improvement at system level.

Challenges and unintended effects of M&E processes

The process of monitoring and evaluating ECEC quality is characterised by a range of challenges. In particular, it is important to ensure that relevant data are collected in relation to the intended purposes of M&E, and that purposes, values and principles are coherently aligned in guiding M&E processes as ethical practice. Doing so requires the use of tools that are fit for purpose, complementary to each other, and adequately capture the multiple dimensions of ECEC quality, while also being appropriately tailored to different stakeholders within the ECEC system (including both service providers, and beneficiaries such as children and parents). As M&E must serve the best interests of children, respecting their dignity and that of their families, protecting their privacy and the confidentiality of the information collected is crucial. The practice and tools adopted in M&E processes should respect the characteristics of children and their families, viewing diversity as a means of learning and development for the entire education community.

If not addressed, these challenges may result in an M&E system whose tools, activities, and approaches are not aligned with its broader purposes and objectives, thus simultaneously preventing the achievement of the M&E system's intended positive effects while also resulting in **unintended negative consequences**.

For instance, M&E processes may result in **fatigue among implementers** and **anxiety or demotivation among ECEC staff**, particularly in the context of a high bureaucratic and administrative burden or an over-emphasis on quality control. To nurture staff and implementers' motivation and sense of purpose, it is advisable to maintain a close link between evaluation activities and quality improvement initiatives, so as to demonstrate the positive impact that the M&E process may have.

Additionally, the **publication of M&E results** should be handled with care in order to ensure that the benefits of publication outweigh the risks.

Benefits of publishing M&E results for individual ECEC centres include the following:

- facilitating transparency and accountability of service providers to children, parents, the general public, and taxpayers (particularly in areas where ECEC is run using public funds);
- making visible 'good practice' examples of centres;
- acknowledging quality improvement in individual centres, which may have the added benefit of motivating further quality improvement in future.

In contrast, the risks of publishing M&E results include encouraging **ranking of individual ECEC centres**, which in turn might lead to **increases in competitiveness between ECEC centres as well as parents** (thus disincentivising collaboration between centres and disrupting social cohesion between communities) and **social stratification in attendance** (where better-advantaged and more data-literate parents select higher-performing centres, resulting in a concentration of disadvantaged children in lower-performing centres and the perpetuation of educational inequality). In cases where the assessment of children's educational outcomes is used as a marker of ECEC quality, ECEC providers might be **incentivised to increase selectivity of access**.

To avoid the pitfalls of publishing M&E results while still maintaining the benefits of transparency and accountability, it is recommended to avoid ranking ECEC centres against each other and instead provide individual centres with published ratings of the quality of their services (for example 'satisfactory', 'very good', 'excellent', or 'needs improvement'). M&E results could also be published in aggregated form, thus shedding light on regional disparities or particular weaknesses in an ECEC system's provision and guiding policy decisions around improvement initiatives. Importantly, published M&E results must be fair and accurate.

Finally, M&E processes may **unintentionally make strong statements about what does and does not matter in ECEC quality**, as well as **whose voices matter**, as a result of the decisions made about *what to measure* and *who to consult* in M&E activities.

For instance, an M&E process that does not consider the perspective of parents and children, or uses tools which are not adequately tailored to encompass a plurality of voices - including those of children and families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, special educational needs and/or disabilities - may imply that their views are not important. Similarly, a M&E system which relies only or predominantly on structural quality indicators (such as staff-to-child ratios and the quality of the buildings and facilities) rather than pedagogical quality may discourage ECEC centres from focusing on and investing in the process quality of their services. As another example, an ECEC system which treats children's outcomes as a marker of ECEC service quality may overlook the impact of children's socioeconomic background on their educational achievement, thus introducing the risk of penalising ECEC centres that serve children from under-privileged communities.

To avoid these pitfalls, it is suggested that ECEC quality be monitored and evaluated from as flexible and holistic a perspective as possible, for example by designing tools and processes in collaboration with stakeholders from a range of backgrounds.

