European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Involving children, parents, staff and stakeholders in monitoring & evaluation of quality in ECEC – Summary

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Executive Summary

This report is situated in the context of the Early Childhood Education and Care Working Group's (WG) thematic focus on the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of quality in ECEC. Under this topic, the WG has been discussing 3 key areas, the 3rd of which is the benefits of and best practices for engaging children, parents, staff, and other stakeholders in M&E processes. This report summarises the WG's discussions and conclusions on this issue.

The report opens with an exploration of why it is important to involve children, parents, staff, and stakeholders in the M&E of ECEC. From a value-based perspective, the involvement of stakeholders in the M&E of ECEC promotes democratic participation in decision-making processes. It also ensures that ECEC is evaluated in relation to the needs of local contexts by considering local perspectives. By sending the meta-message that the M&E process is non-hierarchical and values the perspectives of beneficiaries, service-providers, and the wider community around ECEC, participatory M&E can become a more positive and collaborative process in which all stakeholders are considered to be partners dedicated to quality improvement. The inclusion of stakeholders in M&E is also aligned with the values determined by the Working Group, namely that ECEC should be democratic & participatory, accountable & transparent, impactful & supportive, holistic & inclusive, and contextualized & responsive. There are also significant 'rights-based' arguments for taking a participatory approach to M&E. For example, children's rights to participation are explicitly enshrined in several international guidelines: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the 2019 Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC, the European Quality Framework for ECEC, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and the EU Child Guarantee. The UNCRC and the European Quality Framework for ECEC also recognise that the views of parents need to be considered in matters concerning their child. As ECEC staff play a decisive role in establishing the quality of an ECEC setting, they should therefore also be given the opportunity to provide their insights into the factors that may be driving the quality levels of ECEC. Responsibility for improving ECEC should be shared by all concerned stakeholders and in particular those stakeholders who will be most affected by the process. Additionally, there are a range of practical benefits for consulting children, parents, staff and other community-level stakeholders in the evaluation of quality of an ECEC setting. For example, this process can provide a "full picture" of the quality of ECEC. Moreover, it promotes the generation of more valid, complete, accurate M&E results, as well as a larger evidence base from which to draw conclusions about. Staff, children, parents and other stakeholders can provide valuable insights into factors which may not be immediately visible by an external evaluator's single visit to ECEC setting. Each stakeholders group can provide unique insights on ECEC based on their position with regards to ECEC services: parents and children can provide a service-user perspective, staff have an overview of everyday practices in ECEC settings, and community stakeholders have a holistic perspective of the broader relevance of ECEC. Additionally, involving staff also supports their empowerment and professional development in striving for the ongoing improvement of their practices.

The second chapter of the report addresses the current situation of participatory M&E in ECEC, and the methods for involving different stakeholders in the M&E of ECEC across Europe.

A mapping of the situation shows that the consultation of **children's and parents' views** on ECEC is formally recommended or required across a range of countries.

In some countries, considering **children's** views is explicitly required, in others it is enshrined in legislation, and in some contexts, it is only a recommendation. With regards to the methods of involving children in

the M&E of ECEC, it is important to recognise the Lundy model, which emphasises that the four key dimensions for meaningful and effective participation are space, voice, audience, and influence. At the EU and International level, several resources have been developed to provide guidance on good practice for involving children in research: in the Better Regulation Guidelines by the EU, by UNICEF, by the OECD, by Save the Children, and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. The tools identified to involve children in M&E can be divided into the following three categories: those that gather staff's perceptions of children's views; those that gather external inspector's perceptions of children's views; and those that gather children's views directly from the children themselves.

Parents are generally consulted more frequently than children in the M&E of ECEC, and guidelines specifying how to engage parents in ECEC evaluations are available in several countries. The extent to which parents' views are consulted also varies depending on whether the ECEC setting is targeted at children aged 0-3 and children aged 3-6 (parents of the 3-6 age bracket are consulted in more countries). There are various ways of including parents, families, and primary caregivers of children in evaluating the quality of education and care of ECEC. One approach is through including parents in the councils or governing bodies of ECEC centres, where they can provide input into the M&E approaches of the individual setting. Other methods include carrying out interviews, surveys or focus groups. In some countries, questionnaires are designed at the top-level to support ECEC settings in involving parents in their internal evaluation, and there are also examples of collecting parents' opinions as part of the procedures set for the external evaluation of ECEC settings.

Staff are involved in the M&E of ECEC commonly through internal evaluation procedures. Not all European countries have regulations or recommendations on the internal evaluation of ECEC settings. In the countries where internal evaluations for ECEC settings do exist, there are categorizations of countries according to how "loose", "moderate" or "strong" their internal evaluations standards for ECEC are. Internal evaluation processes may include self-evaluation reports, annual activity reports, development plans or pedagogical plans. Self-evaluation tools allow ECEC staff to share their views without the surveillance of external evaluators. There are various self-evaluation toolkits for staff, aimed at prompting critical reflection, enabling staff to review their service quality. In some cases, self-evaluations involve questionnaires filled out by staff, and sometimes this can be followed by collaborative reflective discussions. Some countries consult ECEC staff through interviews with inspectors as part of external evaluation processes. Another approach of involving ECEC staff in M&E is to rely on their unique position in being able to facilitate participatory research with children. Finally, ECEC staff are also involved in research towards national policy development in ECEC, which is a step beyond the M&E of the individual ECEC settings that internal evaluations focus on.

The category of **other community stakeholders** and the extent to which they are currently involved in the M&E of quality ECEC is difficult to be mapped systematically across Europe, mainly because the variety of stakeholders that this category encompasses is so large, and because their involvement varies according to local contexts. There are models for involving local community stakeholders in the M&E of ECEC, based on participatory research practices, but it is acknowledged that it is difficult to make conclusive remarks about the methods used to involve other stakeholders. This is because they are a heterogeneous group who have very varying relationships to ECEC centres, and secondly, involving other stakeholders in the M&E of ECEC is not as extensively researched as involving children, families, and staff. It is however important to develop ways to involve all relevant stakeholders to ensure a holistic approach to quality development in ECEC.

The third chapter of the report addresses the key challenges in involving all different groups of stakeholders in the M&E of ECEC. These challenges revolve primarily around 1) research ethics and safeguarding (privacy), 2) identifying appropriate tools, 3) ensuring research quality, relevance, and coordination, 4) ensuring that all the actors – including those who tend to be marginalized – are given voice and agency, and 5) ensuring that M&E results do not lead to comparisons and competition or communicate unintentional messages. However, there are challenges that are unique to consulting each group.

For example, due to the very young age of **children** who are engaged in ECEC, there are challenges involved in collecting valid and reliable data on their perspectives. More specifically, there are issues with regards to the language limitations and the child-accessibility of the concepts being covered; the power relationship between the children and the adults collecting data to gather their views ; the ability to maintain children's interest in the task; and the extensive skills required to conduct research with children.

With regards to participatory M&E with **parents**, there are difficulties in designing research tools that provide easy participation in M&E, challenges in including the most difficult-to-reach families (including those with diverse native language or digital literacy competences), and aligning the data collected from parents with the broader purpose of M&E. As the purpose of involving parents in M&E is to gather their subjective perceptions of how their child is experiencing ECEC, it is important that the data collected from parents through a survey or consultation are feeding into staff reflection on how to improve everyday pedagogical practice, rather than being considered as objective quality markers. In this perspective, it is crucial to formulate questions that can be meaningfully answered by parents in relation to their experience in ECEC, and that can be used by staff or decision-makers for quality improvement purposes.

The main challenges related to including **staff** involve creating a supportive and safe M&E environment, creating time and providing adequate training for staff to participate in M&E, the need to overcome negative or fearful perceptions associated with M&E, and dealing with the inconsistencies in results between internal evaluation and external evaluations. Another difficulty is that critical opinions that are expressed by staff during M&E may not always be protected or productively acted upon. Finally, providing staff with too many M&E responsibilities, in addition to their existing workload, can lead them to feel over-worked.

The main challenge in engaging **other stakeholders** in M&E of ECEC lies in the sheer range and diversity of views that may be consulted beyond the ECEC setting, and the associated diversity in methods required to consult them. The specific constellation of additional stakeholders that is best-placed to comment on the quality of ECEC services is likely to be highly context-dependent and specific to each ECEC setting, meaning that identifying and recruiting the most relevant individuals to include in the M&E process is likely to be the first substantial challenge for evaluators. Furthermore, once these stakeholders are identified, they will each need to be engaged in appropriate ways. There is also a need to maintain an emphasis on gathering only necessary and useful data, rather than gathering data for the sake of data.

The fourth chapter of this report addresses approaches to overcoming these aforementioned challenges and presents 27 examples of inspiring practices from across Europe towards a participatory M&E of ECEC quality.

There are several approaches and tools that can be used to gather **children's** perspectives on the quality of ECEC settings. The Mosaic Approach, for example, has been successfully adopted by the Danish

Evaluation Institute to support pedagogues in the process of embedding young children's views in quality improvement processes. There are also creative approaches to playfully including children in M&E, with examples identified in the research project Children as Actors in Quality Development in KiTas, the ERiK children's survey, and using children's drawings as data collection tools. Multi-method participatory action-research could also be considered a successful strategy to engage young children in policy consultation processes, as it is shown in the project commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for the revision of Aistear curriculum in Ireland.

To offer **parents** with opportunities to provide honest feedback without fear of jeopardising their relationships with ECEC staff members, focus groups can be used so that parents can build upon each other's views, or anonymised surveys can be employed. Also, face-to-face interviews can be conducted with external evaluators or researchers. Parents are motivated to participate in evaluation processes when they understand the meaning of it; when they know that their opinion will be considered; when data analysis results are presented to them, and they are invited to discuss how the identified problems can be solved; when surveys are conducted online (with a frequency of at most twice a year); when the questionnaires are short, and all questions are in the reader-friendly language. Examples presented include several parent and family surveys that succeed in creating engagement for parents, that are developed from the bottom up, that provide opportunities for parent-staff dialogue, and that are designed to be inclusive of as many families as possible.

Inspiring practices to overcome the challenges of including **staff** in M&E include the Finnish VALSSI evaluation tools with questions to enhance self-reflection, the MeMoQ used in the Flemish Community of Belgium to gather staff perceptions and measure process quality in daycare services (attended by children under three) , the INVALSI Self-Evaluation Report piloted in Italian preschools (attended by children aged 3 to 6), and self-evaluations through video data. The self-assessment tools and accompanying MOOCS (on how to use the tools meaningfully) developed within the PARTICIPA project – as well as the self-evaluation toolkit developed within the SEQUENCES project – are providing inspiring examples derived from cross-national research projects funded under the Erasmus+ programme. Another inspiring example is the KUMBA quality system approach developed in Norway, which shows how to integrate and triangulate internal evaluation, external evaluation, and children's perspectives. Other inspiring cases include the use of pedagogical documentation to co-create understandings of ECEC quality and involving staff in policy reforms about ECEC.

Finally, as for innovative approaches to including **other stakeholders**, this report considers the concept of co-production as a working practice between experts, and finally the Primokiz example, which is a model of cross-sectoral collaboration among different stakeholders, ensuring that data and expertise is collected from all sectors providing and benefitting from ECEC.

This leads to the final chapter on policy pointers, where a comprehensive overview of guidelines to meaningfully involve children, families, staff and other stakeholders in M&E processes is provided. Such overview is not to be intended as a check-list of actions to be accomplished, but rather as a set of issues that should be considered by policy-makers in the process of designing M&E of ECEC according to a participatory perspective.

Principles for implementing participatory and inclusive M&E processes of ECEC quality across all stakeholder groups:
  ➢ The child's best interests are at the center of M&E initiatives

- ➢ The purposes, values, and principles of research are coherently aligned in guiding M&E processes to ensure ethical research;
- ➢ Adequate safeguarding and privacy measures are implemented to ensure that participants provide informed consent, and are aware of the purpose of the research and the ways in which their responses and personal data will be used;
- ➢ A balanced sampling approach is taken to ensure that as wide a spectrum as possible of stakeholder views are represented (including views from marginalized communities or societally disadvantaged groups);
- ➢ Flexible data collection processes and tools are considered to be as inclusive as possible and accommodate the schedules of a wide range of participants;
- ➢ The data collected from different stakeholder groups are triangulated and aligned to produce a coherent interpretation of results;
- ➢ The results of M&E initiatives are communicated back to the participants, so that they can see what they have informed, and understand the purpose of their participation;
- ➢ The publication of M&E results is handled with care to ensure that M&E results do not lead to comparisons and competition or communicate unintentional messages.

Principles to meaningfully involve children in M&E for quality ECEC:
- ➢ Children should be asked questions on topics that they can influence, and the questions must be asked on issues that are actionable;
- ➢ Children's participation should not be limited to M&E processes, but should be embedded in the planning and evaluation of daily activities;
- ➢ There is an atmosphere of trust and reciprocity between adults and children: children feel free to express their views and feel confident that their views will be considered;
- ➢ With a view to ensure equal participation to all children, the tools adopted for gathering children's views are age appropriate, culturally sensitive, and diversified in relation to children's language and abilities (both verbal and non-verbal);
- ➢ There are M&E tools that capture children's views as directly as possible, complementing other data collection tools;
- ➢ ECEC staff perceived that involving children in M&E is worthwhile from a pedagogical point of view and have the necessary competences to engage children in participatory processes through everyday practice. 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;
- ➢ ECEC settings are provided with a certain degree of autonomy, and support, to decide how children's involvement in evaluation processes is pursued, while ensuring that children's opinions and concerns are responsively and consistently acknowledged and addressed;
- ➢ Statistics about children's participation in M&E are disaggregated to show which children are – or are not – participating in M&E (e.g. children with special education needs or disability)

Principles to meaningfully involve parents and families in M&E for quality ECEC:
- ➢ Parents and families are consulted about questions and topics that they can answer about ECEC;
- ➢ Positive relationships based on trust are established between parents and staff/evaluators;

- ➤ Parents and families are informed about the aims and purposes of ECEC, of M&E, and about the processes and benefits of evaluations;
- ➤ Inclusive data collection processes are designed to ensure that the voices of parents in all their diversity (including disadvantaged, with migrant background, and also those who do not use ECEC) are heard- the language used to communicate with parents and families is clear and accessible;
- ➤ Participation of parents in M&E processes is encouraged by taking into consideration time scheduling and data collection formats that can facilitate their realistic involvement;
- ➤ The evaluation tools for gathering the perspectives of families are designed for parents to provide honest feedback without the fear of jeopardising their relationships with ECEC staff members;
- ➤ Staff are aware of the importance of involving families in M&E or decision-making processes on a regular basis, and reciprocal dialogue with parents is embedded in their daily practice.

Principles to meaningfully involve staff in M&E for quality ECEC:
- ➤ There is sufficient information and training provided so that centres' leaders and staff are aware of the purpose and benefits of M&E;
- ➤ There is sufficient support and training to ensure staff can participate effectively in M&E processes, use the results that are produced, and enact changes following the evaluation- through pre-service and in-service staff training, coaching, etc;
- ➤ ECEC centres' leaders play a crucial role in ensuring that a culture of evaluation and quality development is embedded into the daily practices of pedagogical staff, and in sustaining staff collective reflection and improvement of their practices following evaluations' results;
- ➤ A safe environment is created whereby staff opinions (including critical opinions) are appreciated and protected;
- ➤ Time is provided to staff allowing them meaningful space and capacity to participate in M&E: there is a follow up after staff voices are heard, and a clear communication about "what happens next";
- ➤ Non-pedagogical staff who do not directly work with children (e.g. auxiliary staff, cleaning or kitchen staff) are also included in some M&E initiatives, to provide a holistic view of the ECEC setting.

Principles to meaningfully involve other stakeholders in M&E for quality ECEC:
- ➤ The involvement of stakeholders is done through a well-managed participatory process, based upon a consensus between all actors involved on the purposes of the M&E activities;
- ➤ There is a clear understanding on which stakeholders will be involved and why, guided by principles such as the best interests of the child, the purpose of the evaluation, and expertise in ECEC or the specificities of early childhood;
- ➤ All relevant stakeholders are consulted and heard, with the understanding that the responsibility for the final decisions lies with policy-makers;
- ➤ There is a strategy in place to ensure that even the most marginalised actors are involved meaningfully;
- ➤ Stakeholders are aware of their role and added value, and there are clear rules of engagement, such as trust and confidentiality;
- ➤ Stakeholders are given reasonable deadlines to provide their contributions.