European Education Area Strategic Framework

**Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**

Monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC: *purposes, values and principles*

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

Purposes, values and principles

Manuscript completed in September 2022

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# 1. Executive summary

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

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[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

followed by suggestions on how best to anticipate and prevent these potential pitfalls.

## *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 environment[3]) and to process quality (e.g. staff-child interaction, pedagogical practices).

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

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 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.
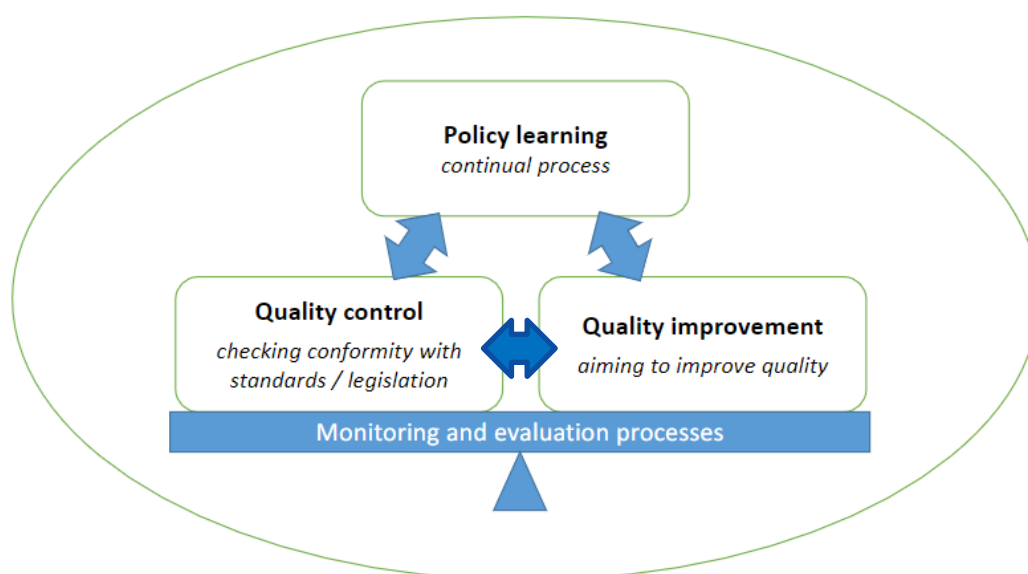


*Values guiding the monitoring and evaluation of ECEC quality: the European Quality Framework as shared reference*

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. | • Avoid relying exclusively on objective measures through external evaluations;<br>• 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 *(accountable).* 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 *(transparency)* | • 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)<br>• Develop a set of indicators and benchmarks through which ECEC quality can be monitored and progression in quality improvement can be tracked.<br>• 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. | • 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.<br>• 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. | • 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.<br>• 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, | • 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. | • 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<br>• 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.***

# 2. Introduction

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Working Group (WG) was established in October 2021 under the Commission's Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (EEA communication, 30 September 2020),[4] 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).[5]

The objective of the WG on ECEC is to facilitate mutual learning among representatives from national authorities in charge of ECEC, stakeholders and international organisations, provide advice and expertise to the European Commission, and offer guidance to participating countries in implementing the 2019 Council Recommendation for High-Quality ECEC systems and the European Quality Framework for ECEC.[6] The WG is also foreseen to produce concrete outputs in support of participating countries' national reforms, including this present report.

Under the current mandate, the main topical focus of the ECEC WG is on **the monitoring and evaluation of quality in ECEC**. The research findings, shared definitions and key questions upon which the ECEC WG's current work is based are laid out in detail in the Background Note, which further explains that the WG's main activities are structured around the following three topics:

1. **Purposes and values** – examining the values that should underpin the design of M&E processes, as well as the purposes that M&E of ECEC quality should aim to fulfil;

2. **Coordinating efforts across levels** – considering how best to ensure that M&E processes are streamlined across the local, regional, and national level, as well as being coordinated across ECEC centres;

3. **Involvement of stakeholders** – exploring the benefits of involving children, parents, ECEC staff and stakeholder representatives[7] in M&E processes, as well as the most effective ways to do so.

In addition to these subject areas, inclusion, staff, and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic continue to feature as auxilliary sub-topics for discussion by the ECEC WG. Furthermore, since February 2022 the ECEC WG has also placed a special emphasis upon the Russian military aggression against Ukraine and the EU's educational response to the arrival of Ukrainian Refugees within participating host countries.

This document is the first published report to come out of the ECEC WG's activities and presents the results of the WG's discussions on Topic 1 (**purposes and values**), and more specifically on the following key questions:

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[4] 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

[5] 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

[6] Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&from=EN

[7] The stakeholders representing children might be Children's Associations and advocacy groups, the stakeholders representing parents can be Parents' Association but also Minority Groups representatives, the stakeholders representing ECEC staff include Trade Union and Professional Organizations.

- **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?

# 3. What are the purposes of monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC?

## 3.1 An overview of existing policy approaches to M&E

Research indicates that institutions in charge of organising, funding and delivering ECEC may approach M&E of systems and services with a wide range of different objectives. While these (combinations of) purposes may vary from country to country, most of them can be divided between those aimed at **quality control,** those aimed at **quality improvement**, and those aimed at **policy learning.**

M&E activities that are linked to the purpose of **quality control** include the following:

- Ensuring that ECEC provision **complies with national standards, rules and regulations** in exchange for **accreditation**, which may also result in **entitlement to receipt of public subsidies**, especially in contexts where ECEC systems are characterised by 'mixed' (public, private-for-profit and not-for-profit) provision[8];
- Supporting **public accountability** and/or **transparency** by publishing results of evaluations, and thus making ECEC centres **answerable to parents and the wider community they serve**;
- Implementing **sanctions** or **rewards** in cases where M&E are linked to funding mechanisms – **rewards** may include **additional funding** or **non-monetary recognition**, whereas **sanctions** may include **financial resource limitations**, **non-monetary interventions**, or in rare cases the **closure** of the centre.

Objectives of M&E of ECEC that place emphasis on **quality improvement** may include the following:

- Progressing towards **consistency of quality** in ECEC systems as a whole (across all providers regardless of whether they are public or private), with a view to **achieving equity of educational opportunities for all children**;
- Getting an **overview of strengths**, **weaknesses** and **areas for improvement** at *system* level, which can then guide the mobilisation of **targeted support** and/or **funding mechanisms** as well as flagging opportunities for **policy improvement**;
- Supporting **quality improvement** in ECEC provision at *centre level*, by **improving pedagogical practices** in ECEC settings (e.g. delivery of the curriculum, processes quality) and **supporting staffs' continuing professional development** (e.g. coaching and in-service training; ensuring engagement and wellbeing of staff).

In addition to quality control and quality improvement, systems for monitoring and evaluating ECEC quality may be designed to fulfil a range of additional purposes, contributing to **policy learning**:

- By directly consulting children, parents and staff for their views and experiences, ECEC M&E may **foster democratic participation** of children and parents in decision-making processes around the management and functioning of ECEC centres, as well as the wider ECEC system;

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[8] In this report, we consider public ECEC providers those services that are directly funded by the state and its agencies at the central, regional and local levels (in terms of funding this means mainly tax financing). Instead, private ECEC providers encompasses all non-public actors including individuals, social cooperatives, voluntary organisations and corporations. Private ECEC can therefore further be divided into non-profit and for-profit provision.

- M&E may also fulfil the purpose of **creating and disseminating potentially impactful information** on the quality of ECEC services for policymakers, researchers, advocates and more; for example, the monitoring and evaluation of ECEC quality may **inform policy-makers** on the effectiveness of their ECEC policies at system level, and enable a thorough investigation on whether and how ECEC policies should be changed to better achieve their objectives.
- M&E can **benefit advocacy** by making the results of monitoring and evaluation available to stakeholders, researchers, parents and the media, thus **enabling them to hold policymakers accountable**, increasing their agency and voice in mobilising public initiatives and sustaining advocacy processes (giving visibility to ECEC as a public good and raising awareness of its importance in society).

Additionally, the policy brief 'How do we Know our Goals are Achieved?'[9] makes the case that a fundamental purpose of M&E should be **to determine whether the full spectrum of children's rights is being met by public services**, including those concerning ECEC as well as those concerned with Early Childhood Development more broadly. To fulfil this purpose, M&E approaches are recommended to take a holistic view of service quality by considering data on a range of key variables relating to children's development, health, nutrition, wellbeing, and protection as well as education.

It is important to note that **the mere existence of an M&E system is not sufficient to guarantee that all or any of the purposes and objectives examined above will be fulfilled**. As described in the OECD's 2020 publication 'Improving Governance with Policy Evaluation: Lessons from Country Experiences',[10] the ways in which results of monitoring and evaluation are used (and by extension the purposes they fulfil) can vary significantly, and uses of M&E results can be divided between those that engage in a *symbolic, conceptual*, and *instrumental* use of evaluation results (see Table 2 below). As the term 'symbolic use' implies in particular, monitoring and evaluation activities may only be conducted in some settings to fulfil the purpose of legitimising existing policies and practices, rather than assessing the quality of their implementation, supporting long-term improvements in ECEC service settings, or promoting policy learning about the quality of the ECEC system and infrastructure more broadly. To exert their intended effects, M&E systems and processes must therefore be designed *intentionally* with a clear understanding of the purposes they are intended to fulfil, and with tools, activities, outputs and results that are closely aligned to those purposes.

#### Table 2 – Categories of use for results of policy evaluation by policymakers

| Symbolic Use | Where policy evaluation is used to justify or legitimate existing policies or positions rather than to look for areas of improvement. |
|---|---|
| Conceptual Use | Where policy evaluation leads to an improved understanding or change in the conception of the policy being evaluated. |

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[9] Urban, M., Acosta, A., Anand, P. K., Cardini, A., Costin, C., Flórez-Romero, R., Guevara, J., Okengo, L., Priyono, D., & E. Vargas-Barón. (2021). How Do we Know our Goals are Achieved? Integrated and Multisectoral Early Childhood Monitoring and Evaluation Systems as Key to Developing Effective and Resilient Social Welfare Systems. G20 Policy Brief.

[10] https://www.oecd.org/gov/improving-governance-with-policy-evaluation-89b1577d-en.htm

| Instrumental Use | Where policy evaluation recommendations inform decision-making and lead to changes in the policies or interventions being evaluated |
|---|---|

## 3.2 The working group's vision

The above list of potential purposes was discussed by the WG members who considered whether any additional purposes of M&E in ECEC could be identified, and whether any specific purposes should be promoted over others.

*An unanimous consensus emerged among WG members that the primary aim of M&E of ECEC should first and foremost be to ensure the highest possible quality of ECEC services for all children. All aspects of the design of M&E systems should therefore centre the best interests of the child, while simultaneously considering the interests of all stakeholders involved (parents, staff, providers and community groups) in ECEC in order to produce a positive impact on quality.*

*WG members agreed that M&E processes must strike a balance between quality control and quality improvement.* In particular, WG members noted the inherent risks in implementing M&E processes that are limited to accountability and adherence to mandatory standards without a proportionate emphasis on supportive and collaborative elements to help ECEC professionals improve the quality of pedagogical practices, such as children's experiences in the settings being overlooked and staff losing motivation.

*WG members stressed that in order for M&E processes and systems to achieve their specific quality-controlling and quality-improving objectives, it is essential to use tools that accurately and adequately capture multiple dimensions of ECEC quality*, including indicators of structural and pedagogical quality as well as children's holistic wellbeing and development. This was acknowledged to be a challenge across many national settings due to widespread shortages in appropriate data, in addition to the relatively higher availability of data on structural quality indicators as opposed to process quality indicators.

*The WG also noted that M&E systems should strive toward a policy learning perspective and evaluate not only the pedagogical quality individual settings, but also assess the performance of the ECEC system overall, including the policies and infrastructure that are put in place to govern ECEC provision.* In this context, M&E processes should aim to fulfil the dual purposes of 1) assessing whether policies are being well-implemented, and 2) identifying gaps and shortcomings in existing policies so that they can be addressed. Linking the outcomes of M&E processes to political processes was acknowledged to be important for ensuring that these two purposes can be fulfilled, in particular through ensuring that empirical data is used to make evidence-informed policy decisions and policymakers are held accountable for acting on the results of M&E processes.
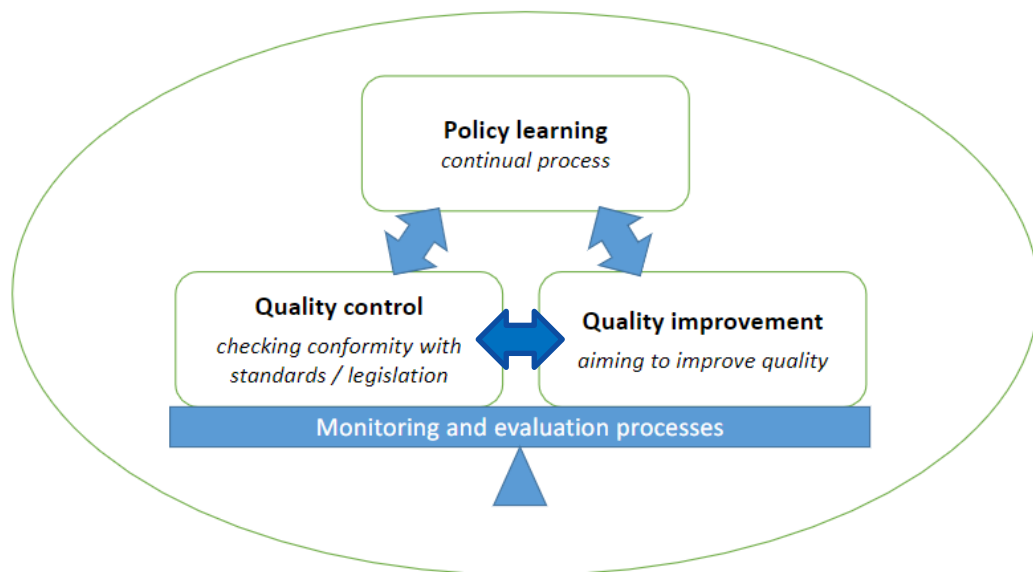
## 3.3. Striving towards Purpose-Driven M&E of ECEC: Examples of Practices

In **Ireland**, two inspectorates (the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate and the Department of Education Inspectorate) carry out external evaluations of ECEC centres, looking at both structural and process quality, while Pobal collects data on measures of structural quality on an ongoing basis. Self-evaluation is supported through a national curriculum framework (Aistear) and a national quality framework (Síolta),[11] and national and local agencies (Better Start and City/County Childcare Committees) support centres to improve quality and respond to the findings of external evaluations. Since 2018, a **reform process** aims to strengthen the ability of the M&E system to achieve its multiple purposes, including **quality control**, **quality improvement** and **policy learning**. Reforms under way include the extension of Department of Education inspections from 3-6 year olds to look at ECEC for under-3s also, and preparation for extending regulation and external evaluation to home-based ECEC. The next steps in reform will reflect an OECD Country Policy Review of the quality of ECEC in Ireland, published in 2021.[12] The OECD recommended: developing a single quality framework to inform both external evaluation and self-evaluation; strengthening collaboration between the inspection bodies to ensure a more integrated and holistic approach, recognising the inseparability of care and education; giving a stronger voice to children and parents in external evaluation; and improving data-sharing between the inspectorates and the quality support agencies.

In the **Flemish community of Belgium**, the M&E **tools** and **processes** developed as part of the **MeMoQ Project** (Measuring and Monitoring the process or pedagogical Quality of Childcare for Babies and Toddlers in Flanders) offer another strong example of purpose-driven M&E through their multidimensional facilitation of quality control, quality

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[11] A Practice Guide that brings together both the national curriculum framework (Aistear) and the national quality framework (Síolta) is available at: https://www.aistearsiolta.ie/

[12] OECD (2021), Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/strengthening-early-childhood-education-and-care-in-ireland_72fab7d1-en

improvement, and policy learning. More specifically, the MeMoQ approach fulfils the purposes of **quality control** and **quality improvement** through the establishment of a **common vision of pedagogical quality,** which is expressed in the **0-3 pedagogical framework**[13] and is orienting both external and internal evaluation processes. For these purposes, the definition of quality expressed in the pedagogical framework was operationalized covering six intertwined dimensions that are defined with sufficient specificity to be measurable through external evaluation instruments used by inspectors and self-evaluation instruments used by ECEC staff in individual settings[14] This ensures that all ECEC providers are assessed systematically using the same tools and vocabulary for quality control purposes and, at the same time, it promotes quality improvement through a dialogue between inspectors and ECEC staff in each setting (shared reflections on what to strive for, with the support of a pedagogical coach if available). Furthermore, the tools used for external monitoring allow to gather data on process quality across settings and providers, thus facilitating **policy learning** at system level. Data aggregated at system-level were collected for the first time in 2016 – when conducting the baseline measurement of pedagogical quality across ECEC settings in Flanders – and will be used in 2023 to conduct a follow-up measurement.

In **Portugal**, the General Inspectorate for Education and Science (IGEC) has the mission of contributing to the quality of the education system in the context of preschool education by carrying out monitoring and evaluation actions. The M&E activity *Curriculum Management and Quality in Preschool Education (Gestão do Currículo e Qualidade na Educação Pré-escolar)* aims to foster reflection on practices among preschool teachers, in order to improve the quality of children's learning and to promote an inclusive education for each and every child. This action focuses on how preschool teachers construct and implement the curriculum, based on the *Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education* (*Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar*), considering that observing, taking notes and documenting, planning, acting and evaluating are part of an intentional and participatory process of **quality improvement**. Inspectors observe educational practices, interact with preschool professionals, speak with children in an informal approach (it is essential to listen to children´s voices) and interview parents, promoting participation and democratic processes. In this action, **quality control** is also carried out focusing on organizational aspects, on the resources available and their adequacy, and teachers' training attendance. Thus the reports, which are produced by IGEC and sent to the director, point out the most positive aspects and the ones to be improved in relation to both process quality (i.e. curriculum implementation) and structural quality (i.e. organizational aspects, material resources and teacher training). In follow-up actions, inspectors analyse together with the school pedagogical teams the work that has been developed to improve pedagogical practices, as well as the improvement processes implemented. Reports for each preschool are published on the IGEC website.

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[13] A pedagogical framework for childcare for babies and toddlers (Kind&Gezin, 2015): https://www.kindengezin.be/img/pedagogische-raamwerk-engelseversie.pdf

[14] Both sets of tools – including SiCs and CLASS amongst others - are focused on the measurement of the 6 dimensions of process quality derived from operationalization of the pedagogical framework (children's Wellbeing and Involvement, Emotional and Educational support, Environment, Respect for and collaboration with parents)

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

Considering that the process of defining quality is influenced by the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders engaged in ECEC provision in each context – children, parents, 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 can 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 down to the level of pedagogical practice. The underlying values of ECEC quality M&E, reported in the following paragraphs, draw upon the key values of ECEC expressed in the European Quality Framework (pp. 9-10), which have been further elaborated and expanded in the light of WG discussions.

### 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. Each child is a curious, capable and intelligent individual. 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. Childhood is a time to be, to seek and to make meaning of the world. The early childhood years are not solely preparation for the future but also about the present. 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.

### 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, and parents (and guardians) are responsible for each child's wellbeing, health and development. Within a context that is set by the national, regional or local regulations, the family 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 parents-professionals relationships should be based on trust and mutual respect.

### ECEC quality lies in staff professionalism and wellbeing

The work of ECEC 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.

## *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 which 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.

# 5. Principles Guiding Monitoring and Evaluation of Quality in ECEC

## 5.1 What are the principles that should guide M&E of ECEC?

Designing M&E systems along commonly-agreed principles can ensure that M&E processes are optimised to meet intended goals. Firstly, making explicit the reference framework orienting M&E activities can better enable all components of M&E to be designed intentionally and coherently. Secondly, an emphasis on values can help to shift 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).

Upon the basis of consultations of existing research and collaborative discussions, the ECEC Working Group sought to identify the main guiding principles that shouold underpin processes and systems for monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC. The WG also discussed strategies for embedding such guiding principles in M&E processes starting with examples of M&E systems in place in their country.

Several central concepts guided the WG's discussion, including **child-centredness** – emphasizing **the role of children as active learners and agents in their own development**. The importance of **inclusiveness** and **equity** in ECEC provision was also recognised, not only in terms of equal access to ECEC services, but also in terms of adequate engagement in activities, learning, and social relationships within day-to-day life in ECEC settings – particularly for children with disabilities or other types of special educational needs. The benefits of a **responsive and contextualised approach to ECEC provision** were also underlined**.** Finally, the importance of **efficiency** in M&E processes, both in terms of minimising the administrative burden for staff and evaluators, and in terms of using public funds for M&E activities responsibly with minimal duplication and resource wastage, was also suggested as a key dimension of accountability.

Additionally, with regard to effectively embedding values and principles into M&E processes, WG members agreed that the **values and principles orienting ECEC practice and the evaluation of ECEC services' quality should be coherently aligned.** As it was noted that a gap can persist between the pedagogical principles underpinning ECEC practices and the principles guiding M&E processes of ECEC quality, *WG members emphasised that principles and values orienting ECEC practice and M&E of ECEC services' quality must be explicitly mentioned and aligned in relevant reference frameworks and policy documents, and coherently enacted throughout the whole monitoring and evaluation process.*

### The Working Group's Vision

As a result of the WG's discussions, the list of agreed-upon principles that should guide M&E of ECEC was revised and modified. The final list of principles to consider are summarised in table 3 below.

## Table 3: ECEC WG's list of potential guiding principles for M&E of ECEC

| Guiding Principles | Definition |
|---|---|
| Democratic & Participatory | M&E is seen as a collaborative process which values the inputs and perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders including ECEC providers, ECEC 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 *(accountable).* Ensuring that evaluation processes are 'readable' for all actors involved, including families, increase their awareness and agency, thus nurturing a shared culture of ECEC quality *(transparency)* |
| Impactful & Supportive | M&E is a dynamic process which strives to facilitate continuous quality improvement in ECEC centres as well as of the ECEC system. M&E processes should support ECEC professionals to systematically document, reflect upon and review their practices in a quality enhancement perspective. M&E approaches that are appreciative of staff professionalism increase can contribute significantly to enhance their competences and sense of purpose, with positive effects on their professional well-being. |
| Holistic & Inclusive | M&E gives equal priority to the full spectrum of children's experiences, including not only their educational development but also their wellbeing, play, and social relationships. ECEC should emphasise children's all-round development while also seeing them as competent human beings and active learners. |
| Contextualised & Responsive | M&E operates on the acceptance that ECEC provision should be adaptive to the needs of the individual communities, settings, and children they serve (for instance in cases where children have specific educational, psychosocial or developmental needs), and that practices may therefore vary while still being aligned with quality requirements at system level. |
| Equitable and Consistent | M&E approach operates on the assumption that children should have equal rights 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, a learning environment is fostered in which all children have equal access to high quality educational opportunities. |

Initiatives at higher or more central levels of the ECEC system can be taken to ensure that M&E processes are guided by these principles, such as specifying the values and principles explicitly in curricular frameworks or legislation and ensuring that the governance bodies responsible for M&E of ECEC are conscious of value-driven M&E in their design and implementation of the relevant tools, activities, and processes. However, the precise ways in which values and principles can be embodied in M&E processes in practice are highly heterogeneous.

There is considerable ongoing discussion – in both national and international policy debates – around the tension between needing M&E processes that consider the views of a wide range of stakeholders (including both external evaluations from inspectors and internal self-evaluations from the ECEC staff themselves) and the need to ensure ECEC

providers' compliance with mandatory quality standards[15]. In this regard, the working group stresses the importance of facilitating an open forum for exchange between inspectorates (i.e. external evaluators ), service providers (i.e. ECEC staff and centres' leaders), and service beneficiaries (i.e. children and parents), thus ensuring that the M&E process and its outcomes are welcoming, useable and relevant for all involved stakeholders while also avoiding an over-relying on the 'assumed scientific objectivity [of] experts and managerial evaluations'.[16] This ensures that external and internal evaluations are informed by a shared and established definition of quality and support the creation of participatory alliances among stakeholders which sustain ongoing quality improvement within M&E processes. When external evaluators/inspectors, ECEC staff/centres leaders and families are aligned in their understanding of quality pedagogy oriented to children's best interests, engaging in M&E processes can become a meaningful way to sustain ongoing improvement of pedagogical practices on an everyday basis – with a view to fostering children's development, wellbeing and learning.

The principles endorsed by WG members, and the various ways in which each set of principles may present themselves in processes for monitoring and evaluating ECEC quality, are described in more detail below.

## Principle 1: Democratic & Participatory

An M&E system that is **Democratic** and **Participatory** considers the views of a wide range of stakeholders such as ECEC service providers and staff, parents, and the children themselves.

As described in the dossier published by *Children in Europe* on this topic, evaluation has the potential to be 'an **ethical** and **political act** whereby direct stakeholders as well as all other citizens are committed to making educational choices without devolving this responsibility solely to experts in education or management.' Indeed, evaluation has the potential to function as a 'form of democratic participation in community life; it [enables the setting] to become a forum and a meeting place for social encounters among children and among adults, **a space of ethical and political praxis**.'[17]

M&E processes that aim to be *Democratic* and *Participatory* will be designed to encourage participation from a wide range of different stakeholders and provide them with opportunities to share their *subjective* views, rather than relying exclusively on *objective* measures or external evaluations. For instance, they may combine **top-down approaches**, in which external inspectors affiliated with the regulating authority observe the ECEC setting and consult staff and beneficiaries (external evaluation), with **bottom-up approaches**, in which the end-users and staff members in an ECEC centre can share their own views on the quality of the services (internal self-evaluation). Furthermore, these internal and external M&E processes should aim to consult the views of both the **parents**

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[15] Klinkhammer, N.; Schäfer, B.; Harring, D., and Gwinner, A. (2017) *Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Approaches and Experiences from Selected Countries*. Deutsches Jungendinstitut, https://www.dji.de/fileadmin/user_upload/bibs2017/Monitoring_Sammelband_E_final.pdf

[16] Musatti, T. 'Principle 7 – Evaluation: Participatory, Democratic and Transparent' (Dossier) in the 2017 publication *Young children and their services: developing a European approach*. A *Children in Europe* Policy paper, pg. 2.

[17] Musatti, T. 'Principle 7 – Evaluation: Participatory, Democratic and Transparent' (Dossier) in the 2017 publication *Young children and their services: developing a European approach*. A *Children in Europe* Policy paper. Pg 3

and the **children** to ensure that the needs of the 'end-users' or 'beneficiaries' are given sufficient priority.

In addition to considering a range of stakeholders' views and perspectives, an M&E system can also be democratic and participatory in terms of the way in which monitoring and evaluation results are used and followed-up.

## Principle 2: Accountable & Transparent

An M&E approach that values *Accountability* and *Transparency*

> ➢ aims to ensure that the M&E process sets clearly-defined roles and responsibilities of all actors involved
> ➢ can prove that the data collected will be acted upon to improve ECEC quality (*accountability*),
> ➢ ensures that the M&E process itself is 'readable' and understandable for all actors involved including evaluators, ECEC service providers and staff, and ECEC beneficiaries including children, families, and communities (*transparency*).

In order to keep M&E processes *Accountable* to the children, parents, ECEC settings, and communities they serve, these M&E processes should rely on a **shared and well-defined understanding of quality** which allows all the actors involved to express their judgements about the quality of ECEC centres.

*Transparency* of monitoring and evaluation processes can be ensured not only by means of making **results** publicly available, but also by using **tools** and **methods** which allow a multiplicity of users to give their own contributions to arrive at these results. Such approaches increase the **awareness and agency of all actors involved**, thus nurturing a **shared culture of ECEC quality** which strives toward improvement.

To ensure accountability and transparency, some countries opt to develop **National Curricular Frameworks** in order to establish a shared definition of ECEC pedagogical quality (as in the case of Finland), while others opt to use **standardised tools** in their system-level assessments of ECEC provision in order to gather comparable data on ECEC quality nationally and/or regionally (as in the case of The Netherlands).

As research suggests that positive influences of ECEC attendance on children (in terms of longer-term learning and development outcomes) are only observed in the context of high-quality care,[18] it is essential for M&E processes to clearly communicate and demonstrate how their results and data will feed into evidence-informed initiatives for improve ECEC quality so that all ECEC-attending children, regardless of background, can reap the benefits of high-quality service provision.

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[18] Klinkhammer, N., & B. Schäfer (2017). 'Quality development and assurance in Early Childhood Education and Care – International Perspectives', pp. 8-22 in Klinkhammer, N.; Schäfer, B.; Harring, D., and Gwinner, A. (Eds). *Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Approaches and Experiences from Selected Countries*. Deutsches Jungendinstitut, 2017

## Principle 3: Impactful & Supportive

An M&E approach that prioritises being *Supportive* and having a positive *Impact* strives to be more than a bureaucratic or observational exercise, and instead helps to facilitate continuous, ongoing quality improvement in the ECEC centres and the overall ECEC system that it assesses. The results of

these M&E processes may be **operationally linked** to funding and/or support mechanisms, and used to direct additional support and resources to regions, areas, and/or settings in which the quality of ECEC services are lacking. Impactful and supportive M&E processes may aim to facilitate ongoing quality improvement by guiding ECEC providers and staff through investment in pedagogical leadership roles within ECEC settings - or through dedicated pedagogical coaching and/or professional development initiatives - which support practitioners' collective reflection on their everyday practice.

M&E systems that strive to be *Supportive* and make a concrete positive *Impact* upon the quality of ECEC services will typically prioritise the production of data that are meaningful and useable for the stakeholders involved in decision-making around ECEC services. In order to enhance the benefits of M&E processes on quality improvement at the level of ECEC settings, follow-up initiatives (i.e. pedagogical coaching or in-service professional development) should ideally be put in place soon after the discussion of evaluation results to maintain high motivation among both evaluators and ECEC staff. Furthermore, to enhance ECEC quality improvement at system level, a systematic collection of reliable data at local, regional and/or national level is important to support policy decision-makers in the design of over-arching quality steering initiatives (as illustrated in the example of Germany reported in section 5.2). In some cases, the prioritisation of impact can be seen not only in the broader operational procedure of an M&E approach, but also in the specific measurement tools implemented in the M&E approach. For example, the  scales used in the Flemish community of Belgium to monitor and evaluate the quality of 0-3 provision (SiCs: Self-evaluation Instrument for Care Settings; and POMS: Process-oriented Child Monitoring System), are both process-oriented and encourage practitioners 'to reflect on "where" and "when" the lower scores are observed, and from there what kind of changes in approach could improve the quality of ECEC services.'[19]

## Principle 4: Holistic & Inclusive

An M&E approach that aims to be *Holistic* and *Inclusive* 'gives equal priority to children's learning, social relationships, aesthetics and ethics as well as to their emotional and physical well-being',[20] while viewing the child as an active agent in their own learning.

A **holistic perspective of children's needs and capabilities** is one which, by definition, moves beyond a narrow emphasis of children's educational attainment (in terms of school

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[19] Laevers, F. (2017). 'How are children doing in ECEC? Monitoring Quality within a Process-Oriented Approach', pg. 185 in Klinkhammer, N.; Schäfer, B.; Harring, D., and Gwinner, A. (Eds). *Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Approaches and Experiences from Selected Countries*. Deutsches Jungendinstitut, 2017.

[20] Musatti, T. 'Principle 7 – Evaluation: Participatory, Democratic and Transparent' (Dossier) in the 2017 publication *Young children and their services: developing a European approach*. A *Children in Europe* Policy paper.

readiness, literacy and numeracy skills) by adopting a broader view on children all-round development and well-being.

M&E approaches that strive to take a *Holistic* and *Inclusive* perspective on children's development and wellbeing are tasked with the challenge of gathering data on a broad range of variables, including some elements of children's experiences that are particularly unamenable to objective measurement. These variables may include, and are not limited to:

- Children's social development and the quality of their relationships with peers;

- Children's feelings of belonging and safety in the ECEC setting;

- Children's empathy and emotional awareness;

- Children's creativity and capacity for independent play.

Due to the highly subjective nature of these variables, M&E approaches that take a **holistic** view of the attending children in ECEC centres are likely to take steps to consider less objective forms of evidence in their assessments of ECEC provision, such as **pedagogical documentation** in which 'even the most immaterial aspects of practices and children's experience can be materialized'.[21] The acknowledgement of the child's perspective is enshrined in Danish law through the Day Care Act, which mandated that ECEC centres should

> *"**Pedagogical documentation** renders learning processes and educational practice visible by documenting them in a wide range of different forms (e.g. notes, photos, video and audio recordings, artistic and creative works produced by children etc.). In this way, they can be shared, discussed, reflected on, interpreted and – if necessary – evaluated. Everyone takes part; children, pedagogical professionals, teaching assistants, families, administrative staff, other individuals…"*
>
> Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2013). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Languages of evaluation*. Routledge.

consider children's views as part of their formal evaluation and gave rise to the increased use of methodologies for recording children's experiences and perspectives in daily ECEC interactions, for example the **mosaic approach** developed by Allison Clark and Peter Moss.[22] Such approach uses a combination of participatory instruments and observation in order to record children's perspectives of a variety of daily experiences within their ECEC settings, shifting the emphasis from children's learning outcomes, and instead towards children's subjective perceptions of how positively they view their everyday experiences in the ECEC setting.[23]

Relatedly, M&E systems that have a holistic and inclusive view of ECEC quality and children's needs may focus more on measuring pedagogical quality than assessing children's learning outcomes. As an example, the study '*Nordic Approaches to Evaluation*

[21] Ibid

[22] Clark, A. & P. Moss. (2011): *Listening to Young Children: the Mosaic approach*. London.

[23] Schwartz, P. (2017). 'Monitoring Quality in Danish ECEC settings with special focus on including children's perspectives by adapting the Mosaic approach in a pedagogical context', pp. 108-133 in Klinkhammer, N.; Schäfer, B.; Harring, D., and Gwinner, A. (Eds). Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Approaches and Experiences from Selected Countries. Deutsches Jungendinstitut, 2017.

_and Assessment in Early Childhood Education and Care_'[24]describes how M&E processes can be designed as 'child-centred' and 'holistic', meaning that the prime object of evaluation is not children's individual-level outcomes but instead the pedagogical practices within ECEC centres.

## Principle 5: Responsive & Contextualised

M&E processes that are **Responsive** and/or **Contextualised** operate on an assumption that ECEC services should be adaptable to the unique needs of each community, each setting, and/or each child. In such cases, National Curricular or Quality Frameworks may be written in a flexible way to allow ECEC centres a degree of autonomy in designing their pedagogical practices. As a result, there may be a wide range of norms and practices across ECEC centres within the same system. Due to the perception that children are individual learners with a unique set of needs and capabilities, ECEC systems that aim to be responsive and contextualised may sometimes opt not to assess and compare children's learning and development according to standardised criteria and instruments.

As ECEC systems and settings that prioritise **_Responsiveness_** and **_Contextualisation_** are likely to result in an assortment of different pedagogical practices across ECEC cres, the M&E processes that are put in place to assess them may be similarly decentralised due to the resultant unsuitability of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

This being said, decentralisation in ECEC practices does not necessarily require a similar decentralisation in M&E approaches. It is possible for a centralised M&E process to be applied consistently across the full range of ECEC centres while also allowing for diversity of approaches, for example by using an external inspection framework to assess centres' adherence to curricular frameworks that are intentionally broad.

## Principle 6: Equitable and Consistent

M&E processes that strive for _Equity_ and _Consistency_ operate on the assumption that **all children have equal rights 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.** According to these principles, M&E processes prioritise ensuring that ECEC learning environments provide the adequate framing conditions for all children to benefit from high-quality ECEC, thus striving to educational equity by tackling regional/local disparities and accommodating diversity in pedagogical approaches and practices. Such M&E approaches may be part of an ECEC system which places strong emphasis on adherence to a National Curricular or Quality Framework, and which takes a centralised approach to monitoring and evaluation across ECEC centres.

An M&E approach which is premised on the principle that ECEC services and quality should be _Equitable_ and _Consistent_ is likely to emphasise the use of standardised, centralised, and/or consistent monitoring and evaluation tools, particularly in light of the need for comparable data to assess each centre's adherence to specified quality thresholds.

Although some countries have trended towards reduced external quality regulation in favour of increased autonomy in ECEC centres, others have developed increasingly specific

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[24] Urban, M., Guevara, J., Semmoloni, C., Reikeras, E., Eidsvag, G., M., and J. C. Saebo. (2022). _Nordic Approaches to Evaluation and Assessment in Early Childhood Education and Care._ Available at: https://pub.norden.org/temanord2022-512/#

quality requirements for ECEC services in the interest of safeguarding children's rights to high-quality education and care. **The Netherlands**, for example, emphasised self-regulation of ECEC settings with its Child Care Act of 2005, however it subsequently re-introduced regulations and enforceable standards for quality assurance through new laws in 2010, 2011, and 2012 in order to combat the lack of information and clarity on ECEC services.[25] To enforce quality standards, some ECEC systems may also **make funding and/or formal accreditation** (and the retainment of that funding and formal accreditation) **conditional on meeting the required standards of quality**.

## 5.2 Shaping M&E of ECEC with Guiding Principles: Examples of Practices

In **Finland,** the national ECEC evaluation system is currently being developed by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC).[26] FINEEC is an independent government organization responsible for all national evaluations from ECEC to higher education. The Finnish system promotes **democratic and participatory** M&E processes by fostering an evaluation culture, where evaluation is based on open discussion and dialogue rather than control or accountability[27]. At the local level and the level of pedagogical practices evaluations are carried out as self-evaluations, which not only encourage the ECEC providers and their staff to identify areas for improvement and development in their activities, but also help them to focus on the existing strengths.

FINEEC is currently developing evidence-based evaluation tools and digital evaluation system to support the ECEC providers in their self-evaluations. **National evaluation guidelines and criteria have been derived from the Act on ECEC**, the **National core curriculum**, and **national and international research** on key factors influencing the quality of ECEC. The evaluation of Finnish ECEC is **holistic and inclusive**, and focuses on the child's early educational environment, the staff's pedagogical work and the operating culture as well as the prerequisites for the child's learning, development and well-being created as a sum of these factors.[28] At the same time, M&E processes are carried out in a **contextualised and responsive** manner: FINEEC's evaluation tools will produce up-to-date information on how efforts to improve ECEC quality should be targeted at the local level and how it will improve ECEC.

At the national level, the evaluation tools and the digital system will make it possible to evaluate and improve quality as part of FINEEC's statutory national evaluations. Fostering an **impactful and supportive** evaluation culture based on trust enhances the motivation of the ECEC staff to commit to the evaluations and most importantly, to the follow-up processes of improving their practices. The future orientation of the evaluations is considered important. Instead of merely looking backwards, assessing, and stating the facts, evaluation is associated with the possibility of learning: when evaluation is

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[25] Naumann, I., McLean, C., Koslowski, A., Tisdall, K., & E. Lloyd. (2013): *Early Child-hood Education and Care provision: International Review of Policy, Delivery and Funding. Final report.* Scottish Government Social Research, Edinburgh. Available online at: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch

[26] https://karvi.fi/en/early-childhood-education/

[27] The Finnish M&E approach does not utilise external inspections: local actors are responsible for improving the quality of ECEC services, and while legislation specifies that self-evaluations are required, it leaves ECEC centres considerable freedom to decide what should be evaluated in self-assessments as well as how.

[28] Evaluation objects relevant to these prerequisites may include interaction between the staff and children, the atmosphere and learning environment of the ECEC unit, the staff's pedagogical choices, cooperation with families, and structures that support and regulate the activities.

experienced as something important to one's own work, change is possible and leads to continuous improvement and evolution.

**Germany's** 2019 Act on Good Early Childhood Education and Care (Gute-KiTa-Gesetz) introduced a comprehensive process for system-level monitoring of ECEC quality which includes a combination of administrative data from official Child and Youth Welfare Statistics and nationwide representative surveys conducted among stakeholders to take account of their perspective on ECEC quality. These surveys, which gather the perspectives of children, parents, youth welfare offices, provider organisations, family day carers, and professionals and managers in daycare centres, are carried out to a scientific standard by German Youth Institute's and Technical University of Dortmund's researchers. While this consultation and prioritisation of a range of views demonstrate Germany's commitment to an M&E system that is **democratic** and **participatory**, the way in which M&E results are overseen and used demonstrates a similarly strong dedication to **transparency** and **accountability**, particularly at the level of policy. The survey findings and administrative data are combined in reports[30] that are submitted on an annual basis by the Family Ministry, and are overseen and discussed both by a panel of experts (from research and professional practice) and by a joint expert committee for the implementation of the Act in which both the Federal government and the various Länder are represented, from a perspective which values **impactful** and **supportive** M&E processes at system level.

In **Lithuania**, a new system for the external evaluation of the quality of activities implemented in preschool institutions (attended from children aged 1 to 6) and pre-primary education (attended by children aged 6 to 7) was recently developed by the National Education Agency and approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport in  June, 2022. Methodological guidelines for implementing external evaluation were also prepared with the aim of supporting ECEC implementing institutions in the process of undergoing external assessment. **Seven areas of assessment** are proposed for the evaluation of process quality in preschool and  pre-primary education programs: 1. Child's well-being; 2. Education; 3. Educational environments; 4. Pedagogical strategies; 5. Assessment and pedagogical planning; 6. Collaboration with families; 7. Culture of learning organization. It should be noted that these areas are aligned to the dimensions of the universal development guidelines for education institutions developed by the Lithuanian Ministry of Education in 2015 (The Good School Concept) and cosely related to the areas of the European Quality Framework for ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019). In the methodological guidelines for conduting external assessment of preschool and pre-primary education provision is stressed that the same principles must be followed as when conducting internal assessment: **responsibility, holisticity, impartiality, contextuality, collaboration and creation of a culture of quality pursuit.** In this sense, both inspectors and members of the **pre-school and preprimary education communities** must be guided by these principles when conducting external evaluation: external assessment is a formative evaluation, it is a process of **cooperation with the ECEC implementing institutions**, a mutual dialogue, during which it is important to hear and listen to the evidence provided by the such communities, to take into account the specific social, economic, cultural, technological and pedagogical context within which such institutions are placed. The assessment process must **be based on the interaction between external evaluators and the ECEC implementing institution**, which would encourage ECEC professionals to critically reflect on their own practices, to strengthen their confidence in their own strengths and to build capacity to address those areas which need improvement.  **The intention** underlying such assessment model is to **create a work culture that encourages and supports the pedagogical community**:  the

information, questions, clarifications, and feedback provided in the evaluation process must be **clear and understandable** to all process participants and interested parties to sustain them in the process of setting goals for quality improvement, and to focus on the implementation of common agreements.

# 6. Challenges and unintended effects of monitoring and evaluation processes

The process of monitoring and evaluating ECEC quality is characterised by a range of key challenges, particularly relating to the **availability and collection of data**, the effective **engagement of key stakeholders**, and the **appropriate use of M&E outputs and results**. If not addressed, these challenges may lead M&E processes to carry unaddressed risks and pitfalls. Through engagement with existing research, examples of country-specific practices, and collaborative discussions, ECEC WG members identified a range of challenges, risks, and potential pitfalls, as well as a variety of good practices to aid in avoiding them.

## 6.1 Key challenges and risks in the M&E of ECEC Quality

The collection of good, relevant data is critical for M&E to achieve its intended effects, and presents a key challenge for designers of M&E processes and systems. The ability to collect data of adequate quality is hinged upon the development and use of **data collection tools that accurately and adequately capture the multidimensional nature of ECEC quality**. These need to be 'fit for purpose' (in terms of the quality indicators being examined and the appropriateness of the tool for the end-users and stakeholders being consulted), and complementary to each other (in cases where multiple different tools are used to capture information on different dimensions of quality, and/or from different stakeholders).

Relatedly, collecting complete data on the quality of ECEC services also requires that M&E processes **involve a broad spectrum of relevant stakeholders in ECEC**, and include inputs not only from the various levels of *service maintainers and providers* (i.e. local government actors, centre heads, team leaders and individual staff) but also from *beneficiaries* such as parents, children and other community members. Engaging meaningfully with the full range of stakeholders is challenging, as their varying needs, roles and functions within the ECEC system may require a similarly broad variety of different tools approaches.

Another key challenge is to ensure that the practice and tools adopted for data collection and analysis are **ethically appropriate** and **ensure that children's rights are respected throughout the M&E process**. 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. Furthermore, M&E processes should promote equity and equal opportunities, regardless of the characteristics of children and their families, viewing diversity as a means of learning and development for the entire education community.

There are also distinct challenges in relation to **the way that data deriving from M&E processes are used and acted upon**. Outputs and results on individual centres should be published in such a way as to avoid unnecessary negative effects, and ideally be linked to support mechanisms (whether through additional training, supervision or funding) to help ECEC centres improve the quality of their services in targeted ways. Clear links should also be drawn between M&E results and related governance institutions and policy initiatives, to ensure that quality is improved across the whole ECEC system.

Finally, the **lack of human resources in inspectorate agencies and departments engaged with external M&E processes** can also pose a challenge to meaningful

implementation of M&E practices. In order to prevent a merely bureaucratic approach – as well as work overload of evaluators – investments need to be made to ensure that inspectorates and departments responsible for external evaluation are adequately staffed and that evaluators are equipped with specific knowledge and understanding related to the ECEC field. The latter is particularly important in order to avoid that M&E processes in ECEC are adjusted to requirements of the M&E systems at other levels of education (i.e. primary school), without acknowledging the specific nature of ECEC.

If not addressed, the challenges presented above may result in an M&E system whose tools, activities, and approaches are not aligned with its broader purposes and objectives. This may simultaneously prevent the achievement of the M&E system's intended positive outcomes while also resulting in unintended negative consequences, even in the context of careful planning. **The implementation of M&E processes therefore carries inherent risks and potential pitfalls**, some of which include:

- the risk that if the data collected is not of clear relevance or use to each stakeholder, M&E activities be perceived as an inconsequential or merely bureaucratic task with no impact (or even detrimental effects) on quality improvement, thus resulting in reduced motivation among evaluators and ECEC staff;
- the risk that if M&E results of individual settings are published, it may trigger a shift from cooperation to competition between ECEC centres as well as increased social stratification (where better-off and more data-literate families select higher-performing centres, leading to a concentration of disadvantaged children in lower-performing centres and thus the perpetuation of inequality in access to education);
- the unintentional incentivisation of selective access to ECEC centres, in cases where children's outcomes data are used to inform rewards for high-performing ECEC centres and/or sanctions for under-performing ECEC centres, particularly when policies adapt their funding according to outcomes (i.e. through sanction or reward mechanisms) without monitoring input (accessibility), thus reducing equal access; and
- the risk that in order to perform as well as possible during M&E processes, ECEC centres may 'narrow down' and 'standardise' their curricula to focus predominantly on 'what is measured' throughout evaluation .

## 6.2 Counteracting risks and avoiding pitfalls when designing monitoring and evaluation processes

The value-driven design of M&E processes and approaches can help to ensure that all operational aspects of an M&E system are relevant and aligned with its identified purposes and objectives. Additionally, there are a range of general **good practices** that can support M&E implementers in avoiding negative effects, including:

- piloting M&E systems before their full implementation;
- using diverse and complementary tools for data collection;
- involving all relevant stakeholders not only in consultations as part of M&E processes, but also in the design of the M&E processes themselves to ensure that they are appropriate, relevant and well-received by their end users;
- seeking to involve relevant stakeholders in follow-up initiatives, to demonstrate that their views are valued and encourage ownership over the M&E process;
- publishing M&E results in aggregated form on access and process quality to support policy learning and some targeting of quality improvement initiatives; and
- handling centre-level evaluation results with care.

Some 'sensitive' areas in M&E, in which the risks of unintended negative consequences are particularly high, may require more concerted and targeted efforts to avoid potential pitfalls. These sensitive areas include the **experiences of individuals involved in M&E processes** (including M&E implementers as well as the ECEC service providers being assessed), the **publication of M&E results**, the potential **'narrowing' in understandings of ECEC quality** and the **loss of perspective on the fundamental objectives of M&E**. To avoid these specific potential pitfalls, the WG proposes a range of recommendations in the sections below.

### *Addressing pitfalls relating to individuals' experiences of the M&E process*

The WG noted that there is a **high risk of fatigue** among staff in charge of **implementing** M&E processes, especially in cases where M&E activities are resource intensive and/or the results are not clearly linked to improvement mechanisms, thus causing the positive outcomes of their work to be insufficiently visible and contributing to perceptions of the M&E activities as arbitrary. Minimising the bureaucratic and administrative burden of the M&E activities for staff was suggested as a way to improve their motivation, as well as ensuring that the importance and impact of their work are clearly communicated both during the M&E process and through continued follow-up communications on the usage of their results.

There is also a risk that **M&E activities may be perceived negatively by ECEC service providers and beneficiaries**, especially in the context of M&E approaches that over-emphasise quality control in comparison to quality improvement. Intensive and controlling M&E activities may cause anxiety for staff, settings, and children, while also reducing staff motivation, and subsequently inhibit ECEC service quality in the short-term. Furthermore, even when high-quality self-evaluation tools are used, ECEC service providers may still perceive M&E activities as bureaucratic checklist exercises rather than an opportunity to reflect and inspire improvements.

**The WG suggests** emphasising the importance of ensuring that the tone and intentions of M&E processes are as supportive, appreciative, collaborative, and growth-oriented as possible in order to keep ECEC staff  motivated and engaged. In cases where quality is found to be inadequate, M&E findings should be presented in an honest, accurate, and fair way, and should stress collaboration towards quality improvement.

### Box 1. Empowering staff in the quality improvement process: the International Step by Step Association's 20 principles of quality pedagogy

> ISSA has developed a set of 20 principles quality pedagogy called "The Competent Educators of the 21st Century'',[1] capturing key competences around seven focus areas of process quality, for educators working with children of 3 to 10 years of age.
> Through a set of tools included in the Quality Resources Pack,[1] the principles have been used in close to 27 countries to drive the quality improvement process at the individual and service level. Based on the results from observations, self- and peer assessment, self- and group reflection (professional learning communities) using the quality principles and indicators, ECEC staff was able to develop individual and service-level professional development plans for improving the quality of their practice. The process empowers ECEC staff as lead actors in the quality improvement process, providing them with a shared understanding around quality practice in ECEC, the tools to monitor and assess the level of quality achieved in their practice, and ownership over the quality improvement plans.

*Addressing pitfalls relating to publication of M&E results*

The WG acknowledges that the publication and dissemination of M&E results is necessary for transparency and accountability, and has a range of benefits. These include

➢ facilitating accountability of ECEC providers to stakeholders such as parents, staff, communities, policymakers and taxpayers (particularly in cases where ECEC services are run on public funds);

➢ promoting full transparency of M&E processes; identifying ECEC centres that can act as good practice examples for peer learning and knowledge-sharing;

➢ recognising quality improvement in centres, thus rewarding the efforts of centres who strive to do better;

➢ and incentivising ECEC centres to sustain adequate quality and strive for continuous quality improvement.

However, the publication of M&E results on individual centers can also carry a number of risks, and participating countries are encouraged to handle these results with caution, basing decisions about publication on a thorough consideration of the risks and benefits of both.

**Using the results of individual ECEC centres to create rankings or league tables**, for instance, **is potentially harmful for a number of reasons**:

1. the rankings may foster competition among centres, and subsequently discourage collaboration and mutual learning while also distracting them from focusing on ensuring quality services for the children who attend their centres;

2. the rankings may foster competition among families, thus creating social segregation and weakening social cohesion in communities;

3. the rankings may increase social stratification, as data-literate and more socially advantaged families may select higher-performing centers, resulting in a concentration of socioeconomically disadvantaged children in lower-performing centers;

4. in cases where the rankings are based at least partly on children's outcomes (for example in standardised testing) and there is a considerable share of private provision, selective access favouring high-SES families might be untentionally incentivised.

**One possible solution to avoid these pitfalls, while still maintaining transparency and accountability, would be to avoid ranking ECEC centres against each other according to M&E results on a centralised platform, and instead make the M&E results of each ECEC centre visible in isolation.** For example, rather than being given a spot in a league table, each ECEC centre can be given ratings to indicate their quality along broad lines, such as 'satisfactory', 'very good,' and 'excellent'. This approach to publication would make visible the quality of each individual center in isolation, while also making visible any improvement or deterioration in the quality of the ECEC centre over time.

**Another solution may be to publish M&E results in aggregated form.** Publishing this data by region, for instance, may reveal geographic inequalities in ECEC quality while also shedding light on any dimensions of quality that are falling consistently short in an ECEC system (for example the quality of buildings, availability of staff, quality of interactions between staff and children, involvement of families, or accessibility of services

for children with special educational needs and disabilities), without increasing social stratification. Furthermore, this approach would provide enough evidence in the public domain for service users to advocate for improvements in quality and equality of access, while also enabling policy learning and targeted quality improvement initiatives at the system level.

**Box 2. Example from the Flemish Community of Belgium: publishing centre-level M&E results to inspire quality improvement.**

To inspire and encourage pre-primary schools to collaborate and consider how to improve their own practices, the Flemish Education Inspectorate published 'Working Together on Qualitative Preschool Participation: An Inspirational Guide for Preschool Teachers'.[29] During regular M&E audits, the Education Inspectorate selected ECEC centres that stood out as being particularly high-quality and described them in detail using useful examples to illustrate 1) what high-quality ECEC practices look like, and 2) how to achieve them.

*Addressing pitfalls relating to the 'narrowing' of definitions of quality and objectives of M&E*

In light of the challenges involved in adequately and comprehensively measuring quality in ECEC, there is a **significant risk that M&E processes may unintentionally make strong statements on what does and does not matter, not only in terms of pedagogical, process and structural quality, but also in terms of the relative importance of varying stakeholders' views**. For example:

- An M&E system which relies on structural quality indicators (such as staff-to-child ratios and the quality of buildings and facilities) rather than pedagogical quality may discourage ECEC centres from focusing on and investing in the process quality of their services; in contrast, under-emphasising structural quality in favour of pedagogical quality may lead to a de-prioritisation of the health and safety aspects of an ECEC centre's buildings and facilities.

- An M&E system which uses tools that fail to fully capture all the dimensions of pedagogical quality may create more reductive understandings of what pedagogical quality actually involves within ECEC centres and affect the day-to-day work of staff (i.e. leading to a narrowing down and standardisation of the curriculum). For example, an over-emphasis on children's school readiness may deliver the message to ECEC centres that educational outcomes are the only (or most) important markers of service quality, thus encouraging a disregard for other indicators of quality (such as children's social relationships, emotional wellbeing, play, exploration and experimentation, and sense of belonging).

- An M&E system which relies heavily on external inspections without an additional self-evaluation component may imply to ECEC service providers that their views, and those of parents and children, are not considered important.

- An M&E system which does not consciously include tailored processes, tools or activities for gathering the views of children with socioeconomic disadvantage,

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[29]https://www.onderwijsinspectie.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Inspiratiegids%20Kwaliteitsvolle%20kleuterparticipatie_ho ge%20resolutie.pdf

special educational needs and/or disabilities may contribute to their further marginalisation.

- An M&E system which espouses an overly standardised, normative and prescriptive vision of ECEC quality may risk ignoring or compromising cultural differences and the right to self-determination in some communities (such as Roma, traveller communities and other indigenous minorities), thus falsely labelling variations in cultural practies of ECEC as variations in ECEC quality.

- An ECEC system which treats children's educational abilities as a marker of ECEC service quality may overlook the impact of children's backgrounds and socioeconomic characteristics on their educational outcomes, thus introducing the risk of unintentionally penalising ECEC centres that serve children from under-privileged (and therefore potentially under-performing) communities.

**In order to avoid these pitfalls, it is recommended that ECEC quality is 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**. Adequate tailoring of M&E tools for each category of stakeholders is also recommended to allow more authentic self-assessments of staff and the creation of data that is relevant to their everyday practice.

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