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European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Working Group

Peer Learning Activity

How to collect data and information to achieve a balance between monitoring of structural quality and evaluating process quality?

12-14 December 2022
Brussels, Belgium

SUMMARY

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

The Peer Learning Activity (PLA) was hosted jointly by the European Commission and Office of Birth and Childhood (*Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance*; ONE) in the French-speaking community of Belgium (BeFr). The PLA was attended by members of the EEA Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) representing Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Slovenia and Spain, as well as a range of international organisations including Eurochild, UNICEF, the European Public Service Union (EPSU) and Finnish Union of Practical Nurses, Eurydice and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE).

Attendees discussed monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of quality in ECEC services, both in the context of new developments in BeFR and with regard to practices in other European countries.

The PLA was an opportunity to discuss a range of critical issues in M&E, with a focus on optimising M&E systems and approaches in order to ensure that they are efficient, fit-for-purpose, and result in data, findings and conclusions that are relevant and useable for the improvement of ECEC policies and practices. More specifically, hosts and attendees discussed which types of data and information should be collected to thrive towards better-quality ECEC, noting the need for balance in the emphasis of structural versus process quality. They also discussed which strategies and approaches would be needed to ensure the *validity* and *reliability* of the data and information collected. Emphasis was also placed on understanding the range of human, financial, digital and other resources that countries may need at the level of centres and (local, regional and national-level) ECEC systems to ensure the adequate collection of relevant, valid and reliable data and information on M&E quality.

These issues were explored through a range of in-depth case studies spanning the first and second days of the PLA including Belgium, Lithuania, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Ireland, which shed light on the countries that have (or are in the process of developing) such systems for monitoring and evaluating ECEC. Discussions were also complemented with site visits to a range of French-speaking Belgian crèches in the city of Brussels on the second day. Conclusions were then drawn by the group on the third morning of the PLA through a World Café consultation exercise focusing on three core questions:

- What kind of data and information do we need to achieve a balance between M&E of structural quality and M&E of process quality?

- How can we ensure the quality and reliability of the information and data that is collected?

- What resources do we need to ensure that data and information is collected adequately and used efficiently to improve quality?

What kind of data and information do we need to achieve a balance between M&E of structural quality and M&E of process quality?

PLA participants noted that any discussion focused on the type of data that are needed to inform M&E processes must be framed by a clear vision on the purposes for which information are collected:
- data that are helpful to **support the learning and development of each and every child** *(process quality)*;
- data that support policy decision-makers in providing the **systemic conditions** *(structural quality)* **that allow process quality** to be of a good level and to be constantly improved;
- data that allow to **identify problems** and **address them responsively** by taking into account the **specific context within which they are situated,**
- data that **value** the **diversity and richness of practices** enacted in each ECEC setting, as a **resource** for the entire ECEC system.

O*nly those data that could be put to use should be collected,* in order to avoid over-burden – in terms of additional workload – from both the side of evaluators (collecting and analysing data) and the side of ECEC providers (providing data on a regular basis):
- data should be *collected systematically over time*, to give account of both progresses (made by ECEC setting/systems in quality improvement) and processes (through which quality improvement was achieved)
- *data collected from multiple sources* should be combined in a complementary way, in order to reflect the experiences and voices of all the actors involved in educational process, namely **children**, **parents** and **professionals**.

A well-balanced combination of data related to both structural and process quality should be collected in order to improve - **simultaneously** - the **quality of ECEC provision at centre's level** (supporting professional teams in analysing, reflecting on, and revising their practice) and at **system level** (ensuring favourable framing conditions for ongoing ECEC improvement i.e., adequate no-contact time, etc…).
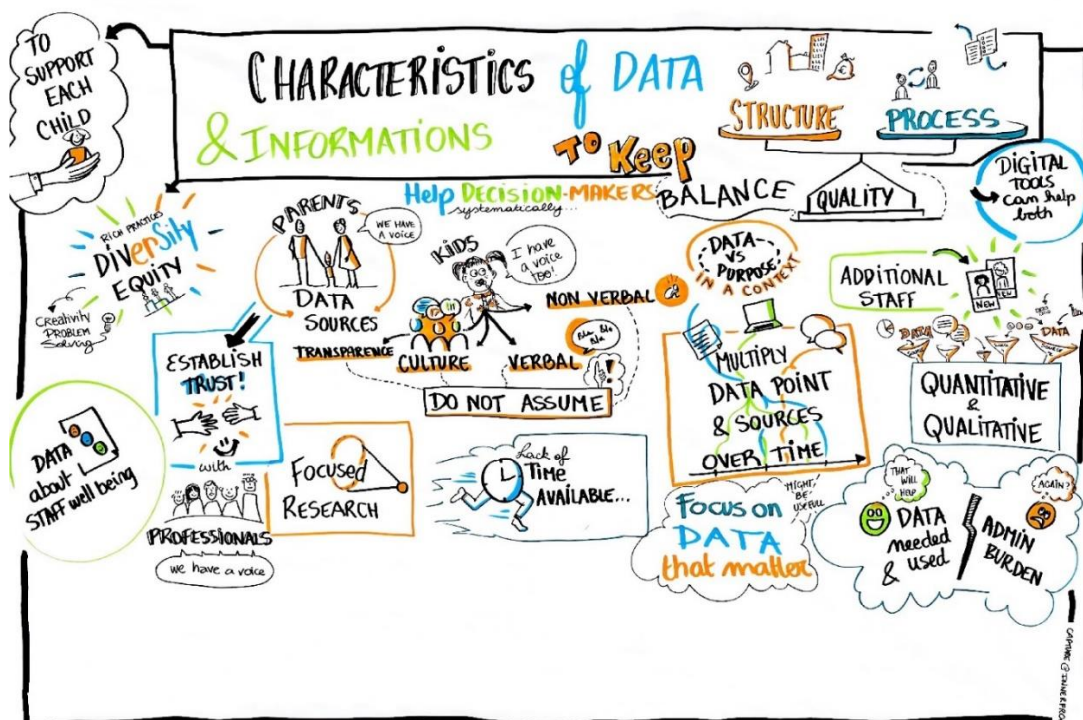
How can we ensure the quality and reliability of the information and data that is collected?

PLA participants agreed that for the data collected from ECEC settings to be accurate and truly reflective of the everyday realities of staff, children, and parents on the ground, it is necessary to build and maintain trust between the individuals providing the data and the individuals or institutions (i.e. external inspectors on the ground, inspectorates gathering data through electronic platforms/systems) gathering the data.

For the data providers (i.e. the subjects of M&E) to trust the data collectors (i.e. the implementers of M&E), it is essential to give them a clear and transparent understanding of why the data is being collected and how it is going to be used. Data providers should be reassured that their data will only be gathered where it is justified, and that it will be used with consideration of their privacy and in accordance with their rights. Furthermore, the end-goal of the data collection should be clearly communicated, with adequate information provided on the outputs to be expected from the information they contribute (i.e. aggregation and analysis, reports, evidence-based policy initiatives).

To ensure that the data collection has a clear purpose, it may be helpful to consult the end-users of M&E in ECEC (e.g. ECEC staff and policymakers) during the design of the M&E approach, in order to understand which data would be most useful for them. More broadly, data should only be collected if it can be analysed for the benefit of users.

What resources do we need to ensure that data and information is collected adequately and used efficiently to improve quality?

As a result of discussions among participants, a typology of six essential resources were proposed: **i)** methodology and design; **ii)** legislation; **iii)** IT services; **iv)** human resources; **v)** communications; and **vi)** budget.

In terms of the **methodology and design**, it was agreed that all involved stakeholders should share a common vision and understanding of the importance, priorities, and purposes of the data collection exercise, and have a shared agreement on what will be collected, how, and why. Political support from policymakers is also necessary to ensure that the vision is given access to the resources to become a practical reality. Similarly, adequate **legislation** is necessary to guarantee that data is collected in the context of guaranteed protection for the privacy of data-providers, while also being flexible enough to allow the collection of data that helps policymakers to achieve their goals.

Adequate **IT services** are also indispensable for the collection, storage, and processing of data on the scale required for M&E of an ECEC system. IT systems should be secure enough to guard against breaches and hackers, while also being useable enough to facilitate aggregation and analysis, and flexible enough to accommodate a range of indicators as well as developments in new or existing indicators. IT systems across health, care, education and other relevant sectors should also be coordinated to allow inter-operability.

A range of **human resources** are also indispensable for the development of a strong M&E system, including people with strong leadership skills to effectively coordinate inputs and delegate roles and responsibilities, people with topical expertise in ECEC, people with adequate research skills to conduct data-collection exercises, people with legal and IT expertise, and people who can work on helpdesks to support data-providers (incl. in cases where platforms exist for the digital submission of data by data-providers themselves). Furthermore, people with data analysis expertise (for example social scientists and statisticians) are necessary for aggregating and drawing conclusions out of the data. On a similar note, **communication** resources are necessary to ensure that the raw data is processed and analysed, so that findings, conclusions, and recommendations can be drawn out of the data and disseminated for the benefit of policymakers and practitioners.

Finally, adequate and sustainable **budget** is essential to draw upon the full range of above-mentioned resources.