

EVALUATION ISSUES IN ECEC: CHOICES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DIVERSE POPULATIONS

Impressions of the 4th meeting of the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years (Amsterdam, summer 2014)

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Resumo

São evidentes os efeitos benéficos dos serviços de acolhimento de qualidade, especialmente no caso das crianças de origens mais vulneráveis, mas é importante esclarecer o que entendemos por qualidade e como as exigências de qualidade podem ser promovidas e garantidas. Tanto a questão da qualidade como a da sua monitorização são bastante complexas, começando por ser necessário refletir: quem define ou como se define o que é qualidade; que sistemas de avaliação podem ser usados, quais os resultados que podem ser esperados?

Palavras Chave: ECEC; Avaliação; Qualidade; Monitorização; Diversidade.

Abstract

When there is overwhelming evidence on the beneficial effects of high quality ECEC services, especially for children from vulnerable backgrounds, it is important to clarify what we mean by quality and how this required quality can be obtained, upheld and guaranteed. Both the issue of quality and how to monitor it are quite complex however: who defines, or co-defines, what quality is, what evaluation systems are used, what outcomes are expected?

Keywords: ECEC; Evaluation; Quality; Monitoring; Diversity.

The Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years

The King Baudouin Foundation (Belgium), together with several partner foundations from Europe and the United States, among which the Gulbenkian Calouste Foundation, have created the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years (for all info see [TFIEY](#)), bringing together leading scientists, practitioners, civil society members, business leaders and political decision-makers from Europe and North America. During 7 Forum meetings, participants will explore policies and current issues supporting the early childhood development of children from migrant and low-income families. During the past 2 years, meetings focussed on themes as accessibility, workforce preparation and curriculum, parent involvement and evaluation. The website of the Forum contains most relevant presentations, summary reports and video impressions. For more information on the given presentations, we would refer the reader to this website. In this article we will present some of the general content that was delivered and debated throughout the 4th Forum meeting on evaluations and monitoring.

The aim of the Forum meetings to exchange newest research results, strategies, policies, innovations and best practices and create the opportunity to scale-up existing knowledge and evidence-based research. The Forum brings together high-level experts, policymakers and decision-makers with a view to making early childhood education and care for children from migrant and low-income families a priority on the political agenda in Europe and beyond. It also serves as a bridge, creating space for dialogue between policymakers and researchers, who often still seem to speak a different language.

As the first years are critical in children's development, (political) attention for the early years is not just in the child's best interest but in the interest of our whole society.

The early years are critical for a child's cognitive, emotional, linguistic and social development, which in turn lay the foundation for well-being and positive opportunities for schooling and work. While this is the case for every child, we also see that not all children have the same opportunities for such a good and strong start. Children in the context of poverty and/or migration often still have less access to ECEC services and miss out on opportunities from the very start. ECEC services are not as accessible for all as they should be and our education systems sometimes even widen the gap instead of closing it. A diversity of supportive services, such as ECEC, family support and preventive health could give all children, regardless of family background or income, an opportunity to reach their full potential. In doing so, these services may play



a major role in reducing intergenerational poverty. Alongside pedagogical arguments or next to referring to binding children's rights, investing in ECEC also yields a high return on investment, such as improved educational achievement and economic productivity, responsible citizenship and successful parenting. Investing in high-quality, centre-based early education programmes, should not be seen as a cost after all, but as an investment for all children and a strategy to decrease disparities.

Evaluating and Monitoring ECEC with Consideration for Diverse Populations

Situating the conference theme

While the previous meetings of the TFIEY focused on quality elements in ECEC services and provisions (such as accessibility, professionalism and parent engagement), especially for children from more vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, the question of the 4th meeting was about how we monitor and evaluate early years provisions for these diverse groups. What should be measured and why? What do we mean by quality? Who decides what outcomes are aimed at? And more specifically, how do we relate evaluation and monitoring to children and families in the context of poverty and migration?

To start with part of the conclusion, we can state that there is no one perfect method of evaluation and these different questions interrelate constantly. HOW to evaluate depends on WHAT needs to be evaluated and WHAT to evaluate depends on WHY evaluations are being done. The how, what and why questions need to be cleared up before any statement can be made on what type of evaluation is most adequate in a given context. One thing is certain though: quality is never a given, should never be taken for granted and there is always room for improvement.

What to evaluate?

The type of evaluating or monitoring method should be related to the topic that needs to be looked at.

Very often, ECEC services like childcare, playgroups or kindergarten are evaluated in terms of outcome. What have children gained or learned? What about school readiness? How did their behaviour evolve, how did they develop in different areas? Regarding children from more vulnerable backgrounds (migration, poverty, ethnic minorities, language minorities...) it is important to look at the used standard.

Comparing all children along the lines of a 'golden' standard, the middle-class standard, will raise challenges for these children; their living context, their language use, their familiarity with and trust in the service all need to be taken into account as well. The same goes for comparing different groups to one another; a more individualised follow-up of the child's own development can show a lot more than a standardised comparison. Also, what outcomes are considered to be important to be measured? We could say that the child's sense of identity and belonging, or sense of well-being, is as important as the numbers of new words he/she has learned in a year.

Evaluations should be more than measuring children's outcomes and should cover a broader scope. Evaluating service delivery, staff quality, family's participation, implementation, structural quality...is also needed to get a good view on the ECEC provisions. Sometimes, quality is depending on less tangible or measurable factors, such as staff commitment, emotional environment and atmosphere, personal relationships. It is not always easy, or even possible, to add these factors into evaluation schemes.

Another aspect of evaluation is the impact of services and provisions. But again, who decides on the desired impact to aim at? Are there any side-effects for certain groups? How can stakeholders be involved in these decisions?

All in all, defining what should be evaluated is not neutral in itself and it refers to how and by whom the quality-concept under evaluation, is being defined.

How to evaluate?

An OECD literature review (see [Monitoringpoliciesandpractisesinplace](#)) clearly shows that different elements of ECEC quality control ask for different methods. Throughout policies and practice, a certain tendency to install a hierarchy among these methods is noticeable, e.g. a stronger belief in RCT-methods than in more qualitative evaluation systems. This is felt to be unwanted, given the fact that e.g. the level of parent involvement should be 'measured' in another way than e.g. access and enrollment rates or e.g. pedagogical quality. Depending on what needs to be monitored, the most adequate method should be employed.

OECD gave the following overview on what methods are most frequently used in what areas of evaluation:



SERVICE QUALITY	STAFF QUALITY	CHILD DEVELOPMENT
Inspection	Observations	Summative vs. formative assessments
Self-assessment	Self-assessment, evaluations	Tests (standardized or other)
Surveys by staff, management, parents	Tests	Observations (rating scales, checklists...)
Self-assessment/surveys, independent or part of a wider monitoring practice	Interviews of children/parents	Narrative assessments (portfolios, storytelling, documenting)
Specific monitoring for special needs	Surveys (internal/external)	Screening

Some general suggestions were delivered by several of the expert speakers, such as:

- every evaluation needs a clearly set goal and plan from the very start, elaborated by both the researchers/evaluators and the practitioners/policymakers. Both long and short term affects, and both outcome and implementation should be part of evaluations.
- assessing personal interactions (staff/children/parents) should be a major part of ECEC evaluations.
- before measuring quality, quality needs to be defined, practical relevance needs to be ensured, evaluators need to be well trained, cultural and other differences in groups need to be taken into account. After evaluating, results should be disseminated, discussed and linked to the purpose.
- evaluations should refer to the meaning making by all stakeholders and take into account the local context.

As said before, evaluating and monitoring never happens in a neutral context and some tension and debate is present on methodology. There is e.g. a tension between standardisation (rather easy to handle) and diversity (much more complex to handle). There is the recognition of the importance of developing and applying participative evaluation methods besides more purely quantitative methods. And there is an ethical

issue about RCT methods with control groups and excluded groups (who will that be?).

With the question on how to evaluate, considering the situation of children and families in poverty or migration poses additional questions and challenges. How can they be sufficiently involved in defining and evaluating quality of ECEC for their children, answering to their needs and making sense to their views on education and upbringing? We need to be aware of several formal and informal barriers here. Often there is a certain unfamiliarity with the existing ECEC services, they do not always speak the language or understand the underlying meaning, there are different views on what ECEC should be delivering and how, there can be a lack of trust or a certain fatalism...All these elements need to be taken into account and this requires some creativity and sensitivity to reach out to them and actually involve them, to have their voices heard and really listened to.

During the Forum meeting, several innovative methods of evaluation were discussed such as different participative approaches, involving not only children and parents but also staff. It should be clear that, when we talk about participation, this goes beyond the obligatory annual satisfaction questionnaires. Involving all these parties can add to the quality of service delivery, to better aligning the expectations, to the process of meaning making, to reflecting on practice. Discussing these issues with staff can not only serve to improve quality but it can also function as continuous professional development.

Why evaluate?

Evaluations and monitoring ECEC services are relevant for policymakers, for ECEC professionals and, last but not least, for ECEC users: the children and the parents.

It is clear and reasonable that policymakers would want evaluations as a basis for their decisions and political choices and also to follow-up on the use of public funds (especially in times of crisis). The problem here is that it is not always possible to get a clear view on causality or on what makes a service perform better or worse. The defining element does not always appear very clearly from a set evaluation. As said before, quality is built on a diversity of elements, such as level of staff training, personal relationships, certain leadership and commitment, outcomes...and not all of these can be as easily monitored or measured. As the OECD literature review states: it is 'difficult to attribute causality between a monitoring process or practice and quality'. And even



with the most positive evaluation results, there is still the political and budgetary reality with choices to be made.

But also different stakeholders (such as parents, partner organisations...) could make good use of evaluations to be better informed and be able to understand the offered services. But sharing the evaluation results doesn't always seem to happen very thoroughly. This needs to be done in a language that is understandable and accessible and the setting of the evaluation has to be clear. The use of media can be used here to enhance the debate or to serve as an advocacy tool in working towards reform or additional resources.

For professionals and practitioners, evaluations can show them how to keep up or improve the level of quality of their work, it can show the strong points as well as the gaps. It can help them in reflecting on their practice. Methods that are stimulating and supportive, like self-evaluations and reflective discussions, rather than judgemental methods can offer more opportunities here. In this sense, evaluations are not just received as **controlling** instruments but can also serve as competence building tools.

Some Takeaways and Recommendations: No Fixed Recipes?

- Any monitoring or evaluating of quality has to be based on a definition of quality and this definition should be topic of debate with all parties concerned, including the most disadvantaged groups. No matter how high the quality of a service may be, if the targeted audience doesn't appreciate it or barely knows about it, they will not attend.
- For low-income and migrant families, a middle class standard will not work. Evaluations considering the holistic development of each individual child may be more equitable.
- Evaluations do matter but evaluations alone will not change quality of ECEC services.
- Evaluations may be more valuable to policymakers if they not only focus on inputs and resulting outputs but also on process and implementation.
- In evaluating ECEC provisions, the used language should be understandable and make sense and the broader context has to be taken into account.
- Supporting, reflective and participative methods, set in the right context, can

lead to more culturally sensitive monitoring than standardized, more judgemental evaluative systems

- There is no hierarchy of evaluation methods: how an evaluation should be done is defined by the question what needs to be evaluated. And the topic of the evaluation is directly linked to the reason why there needs to be an evaluation.
- A combination of evaluation methods is advisable. One result will often lead to new questions for which other methods will be more adequate. There seldom is 'one' perfect setup for evaluation.
- Involvement and recognition of all stakeholders is necessary to get to meaningful results.
- Pay attention to studies that can help understand variations in outcomes
- The debate on what is 'good or bad' for (young) children needs to be an ongoing one, both in a pedagogical and a legal sense. The world changes constantly and their world of today is quite different from the world adults knew. In moving from a parochial to a more cosmopolitan way of thinking, dual language e.g. becomes an asset instead of a problem.
- Quality is never a given and needs to be guarded in a constant and systemic manner

To conclude, it was also made clear that there is not always a straight line between evaluation results and policy decisions: between research and policy stands reality, with all its different opinions and political commitment and choices, which are also needed in democratic societies.

References and Information

Children in Europe, policy paper, principle 7, 'Evaluation: participatory, democratic and transparent' ([Principle7.pdf](#))

OECD, Literature review in monitoring quality in ECEC, ([http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/EDPC/ECEC\(2013\)3&doclanguage=en](http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/EDPC/ECEC(2013)3&doclanguage=en))

The Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years, presentations, background documents, summaries and video reports ([TFIEY_MTG4](#))