

# Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper

principle ⑦

**Evaluation:  
participatory,  
democratic and  
transparent**

This dossier is elaborating on one of the principles in the *Children in Europe* Policy paper 'Young children and their services: developing a European approach'.



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## Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A **Children in Europe** Policy paper

principle 7

### Evaluation: participatory, democratic and transparent

This principle says: «Evaluation should be an ongoing, participatory and democratic process. Evaluation should be open to all citizens, children and adults, providing the opportunity for everyone to discuss real, concrete things and to take responsibility for making judgements of value with fellow citizens – rather than hiding behind the assumed scientific objectivity offered by experts and managerial evaluations. This requires methods such as pedagogical documentation that make practice visible, transparent and subject to reflection, dialogue, interpretation and value judgements – and leave space open for finding unexpected outcomes.»

## What does this principle mean?

Principle 7 states the general criteria for evaluating services for young children within the framework of the values and approach described by the Policy Paper, which aims to go beyond the objective of a quantitative expansion of these services and calls for the respect of children's rights and social equity.

First, Principle 7 points out that the act of evaluation should result from an *ongoing process*, during which service quality is adjusted continuously and open to new perspectives. In this process, a plurality of actors should be involved and be able to express their judgements. Evaluation is to be considered 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. Consequently, the activity of evaluating services for young children can be regarded as a form of *democratic participation* in community life; it provides the service with a further opportunity to become a forum and a meeting place for social encounters among children and among adults, a space of ethical and political praxis, as outlined in the Policy Paper. Evaluation activity becomes an opportunity for communication and discussion of educational themes and values and other social, cultural, and political issues related to education. In this particular forum, diverse values, beliefs, and educational attitudes can be made explicit, recognized and discussed, promoting the respect for and valorisation of *diversity*, which the Policy Paper considers to be basic conditions for democracy in services for young children.

Principle 7 suggests that this discussion process should be focused on concrete matters. The Policy Paper proposes a *holistic* approach to early education that gives equal priority to children's learning, social relationships, aesthetics and ethics as well as to their emotional and physical well-being. Principle 7 claims that the practices by which this approach is implemented should be made visible to and readable by all participants so that they can discuss the practical consequences of their educational choices. Through documentation, which is the representation of practices by a variety of expressive means (Rinaldi, 2005), even the most immaterial aspects of practices and children's experience can be materialized. This statement opens the way to a specific role being taken in the evaluation process by service professionals, who are committed to documenting practices so that they may be subject to reflection and discussion by a wider audience. By asserting that this process of reflection and discussion

can result in new perspectives and unexpected outcomes, Principle 7 suggests a specific strong relationship between evaluation and innovation of educational practices.

## What is the basis of Principle 7?

This approach to the evaluation of services for young children is built on earlier texts produced by European networks of experts since the 1990s.

In 1991, the European Commission Childcare Network proposed a document that was submitted for discussion by more than 3,000 organizations active in the early childhood education sector throughout Europe. In this document, experts from different European countries rejected the idea of defining the quality of services according to a standard predetermined by experts, such as pedagogues or child psychologists, and stated that the quality of services for young children is a multidimensional construct, which takes into consideration both the organisational and the educational aspects of these services. Moreover, the document stressed that the service quality should be defined through a process of discussion among all stakeholders: professionals and experts, parents, and children. This process should be dynamic and continuous. It should also be multi-level, complex and democratic, and involve a wide range of groups with an interest in services for young children.

The 1991 document had a considerable influence on subsequent debate and experiences throughout member states. Its approach was embodied in a Recommendation on Child Care adopted in 1992 by the Council of Ministers of the European countries. The Recommendation proposed initiatives aimed at increasing the number of services for young children in Europe together with some qualitative principles guiding this development.

In 1996, following this Recommendation, the European Commission Childcare Network issued a document setting out 40 targets to be achieved by the Member States in the following ten years. The document proposed percentages of coverage for young children's services and a variety of targets relating to organisational, functional, financial, and educational issues. The last targets (#37 - #40) focus on service evaluation.

Two of them deal with the accountability of the social investment in services for young children. Target #37 states that services should demonstrate the achievement of their aims and objectives and how the budget has

been spent, while target #38 requires children's progress to be accounted for. In both cases, the document proposes assessing actual achievements rather than mere compliance with predetermined models or standards of child development or educational practice. With regard to children's progress, it is noteworthy that the document proposes activating a discussion between the child's parents and the staff about "what happens" to the child, because this discussion can provide a perspective on "how well the service functions". In other words, the document suggests inferring service quality from the child's present behaviour and reactions to the service context rather than seeking future effects of the service on children's behaviour.

The last two targets concern the actors to be involved in the evaluation process. Target #39 stresses the importance of involving the parents' and community's views, while target #40 suggests that staff should regularly assess their own performance "using both objective methods and self-evaluation". Thus, a double distinction is introduced. The views expressed by parents and other community participants are considered separately from the professional stance to be assumed by service staff. Moreover, objective methods and self-evaluation activities are distinguished and opposed. This latter distinction, which is related to the former, reflects the prejudice – predominant at that time – that self-evaluation procedures are important but may not be considered valid for judging service quality. In other words, as Patton (1994) put it, they are considered useful for empowering actors and improving programs but just a preliminary step towards the real thing - the objective judgement made by external experts.

In fact, throughout most experiences of evaluation of young children's services made in European countries during the 1990s, the evaluation tools proposed by experts were rejected, modified, or used within a process of self-evaluation by service staff. Moreover, the service quality depicted by these tools was often found to be unsuited to the local culture of early childhood education.

#### THE EXPERIENCES OF EVALUATION IN EUROPE DURING THE 90'S

Most experiences of evaluation of the services for young children carried out in European countries during the 1990s made use of the ECERS and ITERS-ECERS scales that had been elaborated and validated in the USA (Harms & Clifford, 1980; Harms, Cryer, and Clifford, 1990), but in many cases they were abandoned after a few years. Although their efficiency in giving a rapid and

holistic account of the qualitative aspects of a service was confirmed (as in the Flemish-speaking Community of Belgium), many European experts and professionals asserted that these scales did not meet the needs and the aspirations of the local educational culture and claimed that more contextualized tools were needed for measuring educational quality and to suit the specific type of service (Brophy & Statham, 1994) or the local educational culture and definition of quality (Wessels, Lamb, Hwang & Broberg, 1997; Bondioli & Ghedini, 2000). Consequently, other tools were elaborated, such as CCFS in Greece (Dragonas, Tsiantis & Lambidi, 1995), OtiVE in Switzerland (Pierrehumbert, Ramstein, Krucher, El-Najjars, Lamb, & Halfon, 1996), ISQUEN (Cipollone, 1999) and AVSI in Italy (Bondioli & Ferrari, 2008) based on local culture and values or aimed at making these values explicit, such as ACEI (Darder & Mestres, 1994). It is particularly interesting to note that in most of these experiences, all the scales, even ECERS and ITERS-ECERS, were used by the staff of the services in self-evaluation initiatives in order to activate discussion among the service personnel, rather than to assess service compliance with regulations and guidelines.

More recently, a research group at the University of Leuven elaborated a new evaluation tool for assessing children's well-being and involvement in the service (Laevers, Debruyckere, Silkens, & Snoeck, 2005). This tool, the use of which was promoted in 2003 by Kind en Gezin (the governmental agency with responsibility for young children and families in Flanders, Belgium), envisages that service staff should assess and analyse children's behaviour in order to discuss and improve their practices.

### Judging or assessing quality?

Principle 7 goes further towards the refusal of external evaluation by experts, as it explicitly rejects the idea that the service quality could be defined only according to scientific or managerial parameters. Principle 7 regards the pursuit of a scientifically based definition of quality as deceptive and stresses the value-laden dimension of judgements on quality. This statement evokes the present debate about scientific truth and methodology among social scientists, some of whom emphasize the role of the analysis of values in deliberating about "things that are good or bad for humans", as Aristotle put it, in contrast to scientific and technical knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

This stance in favour of an ethical foundation for the evaluation process does not imply a denial of the scientific contribution of research to the analysis of the quality of young children's services. Nor does it propose to discard the almost homogeneous body of professional knowledge built up within the early education sector over the last few decades regarding the relations between educational

practices and their consequences on children's well-being and learning. What Principle 7 challenges is the assumption of an immediate link between scientific knowledge and educational practices, according to which the evaluation activity would be reduced to verifying the correspondence of an educational practice to accredited implementations of universally valid scientific propositions. The value-laden dimension of evaluation implies that participants in the evaluation process would discuss the appropriateness of practices with regard to their meaning in the social context to which they belong and to the goals that they have decided to pursue.

Principle 7 identifies pedagogical documentation as a powerful tool that enables participants to base their interpretations and judgements on real, concrete practices. Although documentation re-materialises matters to be evaluated by representing them, that is by proposing the result of a previous re-elaboration of children's experience within the service (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999), this representation is contextually-bound and pragmatically oriented and can favour the expression of value judgements.

## The issue of quality in the political agenda of European countries

Interest in the quality of services for young children has been increasing ever since the late 20th century and, in the last ten years, regulations or guidelines for orienting service quality have been issued in several European countries.

It could be asserted that, paradoxically, this greater attention paid to early childhood service quality has resulted partly from their quantitative increase. The more widespread application of a universal approach to preschool education as well as the acknowledgement that childhood services, by supporting women's employment, represent a strong driving force for economic development, have placed the issue of extending the provision on the political agenda in many European countries. The same trends have also highlighted the responsibility of the public authorities for guaranteeing the quality of this provision in the framework of the struggle for equal opportunities in education and against social exclusion.

Tackling quality issues is urgent. The targets of the European Council agreed in Barcelona in 2002, which endorsed the increase in early childhood education and

care provision and sparked a general mobilization in most European countries, do not specify any qualitative requirements or goals. Fresh queries and possible contradictions therefore emerge. What policies and procedures can reconcile the need for provision increase with that of guaranteeing its quality? Is it possible to offer a wide range of services in a country and at the same time guarantee the same quality for all the children and families served by them?

The urge to comply with the quantitative Barcelona targets as well as the financial and economic crisis affecting public administrations in many European countries further orient policy-makers towards a mixed welfare system, where private and public actors participate in provision within the same area. Can quality be demanded within a system of services, which encourages the intervention of different providers and professionals, without imposing procedures that could diminish their capability to offer creative and flexible responses to children and families?

Two distinct goals of evaluation activities seem to be emerging: Supporting improvement and innovation of services quality *and* controlling compliance with regulations. This distinction is echoed by recent international studies.

The OECD reports on its review of services for young children in 20 countries (OECD Starting Strong I and II, 2001, 2006) recommend that every country should establish a specific regulation for all services for young children laying down standards of structural and process aspects of quality and supporting services to surpass these standards and further improve quality. Accordingly, the reports indicate that evaluation activities are needed in order to assess compliance with standards in both public and private services as well as to support practices of reflexivity by the service personnel and innovation of practices.

More recently, a study across 25 OECD countries (Bennett, 2008) has identified some universal quality standards for early childhood systems. The study reports a considerable agreement among experts from different countries on the structural and programmatic requirements needed to ensure quality and proposes a list of 15 benchmarks or basic conditions. Again, the issue of evaluation is mentioned with reference both to the governance of the system and to the programme quality. In the former case, regular national evaluation of the early childhood services (Benchmark # 5) and a monitoring of their compliance with regulations (Benchmark # 6) are called for. Among the requirements for ensuring

programme quality, Benchmark # 12 requests that “Governing agencies provide support to ... participatory forms of quality development and assessment (e.g. pedagogical research and documentation)”.

In sum, the study draws a clear distinction between evaluation activities aimed to guide and control at the level of governing bodies (national, regional, or local) and activities that are carried out by professionals at the service level in order to monitor the implementation of the programme. It must be stressed that the study also expresses the reasonable argument that, in both cases, the evaluation is to be performed with reference to a shared framework of regulations, guidelines, and objectives.

The considerations reported by this study raise two sets of questions.

The first one concerns the distinction between the two goals of evaluation activities, which are supporting improvement and innovation of service quality and controlling compliance with regulations. Does this distinction suggest a potential contradiction in procedures and methods to be used within the different evaluation activities? Does the indication made in Principle 7 that evaluation activities should be participatory and democratic meet only the goal of supporting improvement and innovation of practices? Can a participatory and democratic approach also inspire the control of compliance with regulations by a plurality of providers and professionals, as is expected of social equity policies?

The second set of questions concern the claim that evaluation should be carried out with reference to a fixed framework of regulations and guidelines. Does this obligation put too many constraints on the democratic discussion process envisaged by Principle 7? Does it diminish the role and responsibility of participants in this process and reduce the space “for finding unexpected outcomes”? How is it possible to reconcile the desire to reflect on “what happens in the service”, to discuss whether it is good and, if it is not, to decide how to change it, and the compliance with guidelines issued by a government?

Researchers outside the world of services for young children debate similar questions about the nature and scope of evaluation.

In 2004, the main theme of the Conference of the European Evaluation Society in Berlin was “Governance, Democracy, and Evaluation”. This conference discussed issues and perspectives that are absolutely relevant to the sector of early childhood education. According to

Stame (2006), the function of evaluation is “making the process of governing more democratic” and evaluators should choose approaches and methods that can reinforce participation, ensure transparency, and promote welfare. Evaluation is considered a basic dimension of governance, whereas governance means the process of governing in the broad sense, but can also indicate “a cooperative form of government by networks of public and private actors who participate in policy decisions and their implementation”. This approach, which appears to be widely shared among European researchers on evaluation, acknowledges that evaluation is neither neutral nor objective and opens the door to methods such as empowerment evaluation, developmental evaluation, formative evaluation, that all share the view of evaluation as an ongoing process whose primary purpose is program improvement. It also stresses the effectiveness of participatory methods of evaluation, which, as Hanberger has pointed out (2006): are based on dialogue and discourse among participants; help to increase effectiveness and rationality in governance; enhance accountability by supporting shared responsibility by all stakeholders; and perform an “enlightenment” function as they help stakeholders to see “what it is good for them”.

These statements appear to be particularly relevant with respect to the evaluation and peculiarities of services for young children.

## Evaluation: the peculiarities of services for young children

In many European countries, the system of early childhood services is characterized by a pronounced decentralization of public provision and different levels of government (local, regional, national) are involved in planning, financing, regulating, and implementing services. Moreover in almost all European countries, the system of early childhood services is characterized by a significant intervention by the private sector, above all in the case of services for younger children (Humblet, 2006). In such systems, the issues of *horizontal governance* and *vertical governance* become particularly crucial. Evaluation procedures ought to be able to answer questions related to new trends in public management (governing vs. controlling compliance) as well as questions related to multi-level governance in terms of reciprocal transparency, efficiency and accountability. It also means that evaluation procedures should take into account the

involvement of a plurality of stakeholders (governmental authorities, providers, parents, local communities, staff) and their potentially diverse beliefs, expectations, or requests.

The specific nature of services for young children adds further layers of complexity. They are places where a plurality of individuals, with different roles and/or diverse personal or group identities, meet together repeatedly. In such contexts, sharing the responsibility of children's care and education is the most relevant goal; dialogue and discourse are vital to this goal. Therefore, the *empowering* and *enlightening* functions of evaluation acquire specific strength and meaning as they help participants to envisage "what is good for them" as well as to understand and respect each other's view.

This issue has major implications for the participation of service staff in the evaluation activity, and for its meaning and procedures. A first important remark here concerns the fact that formation – education in a broad or narrow sense – is the core activity in services for young children and constitutes a specific task of the staff; this implies that evaluation activity, with its formative impact, should become an essential part of their professional practice. Moreover, as change, in terms of both child development and the evolution of situations and events, is a built-in dimension of practice in these services, it becomes particularly important that the staff's evaluation activities will be carried out as an ongoing, systematic, and regular process, taking continuity and change as basic dimensions of analysis. Yet, all of this does not imply that evaluation activity should be exclusively undertaken by the staff. It should rather improve their competence in analysing and documenting children's experience in order to provide its thorough representation to parents and other stakeholders.

Another consideration concerns parents' involvement in evaluation, how it is proposed, implemented, and, finally, taken into account by the service staff and providers. Questioning parents exclusively about their satisfaction with the service misrepresents their complex status. First, they are not mere customers but principal partners of the service staff in the task of educating the child. Second, as their involvement in the service and their relationships with the staff may affect their own well-being and shape their parenting behaviour, they can be considered direct users of the service. In fact, in the most developed systems of quality evaluation, such as the accreditation systems proposed by the professional association NAYEC in the USA or by the federal agency NCAC in Australia, parents are requested to express detailed judgements on different

aspects of the service quality. In these systems, parents' evaluations are assessed separately from the evaluations expressed by the service staff or by external experts, and specific procedures for assembling the judgements of all the stakeholders into an overall final result are laid down. However, these procedures seem to disregard the need for a real integration among the different evaluations, which could result from a direct interaction between parents, staff, and providers, during which the partners can develop a dialogue, cooperate in a process of meaning making and, eventually, open new perspectives on children's education.

Furthermore, it is not irrelevant that participation in the evaluation by professionals, parents, and local community mainly occurs at the level of the individual service, while the control of compliance with requirements is performed by governing agencies, which are expected to operate with reference to a wider area.

Thus, two related questions emerge. The first concerns the process of evaluation at a local level: how is it possible to contrast, combine, or integrate the potentially divergent evaluations made by the different partners? The second question concerns the relationship between the two evaluation processes, which are aimed respectively at improving quality and controlling compliance with standards and requirements, and they too can be potentially discrepant: how is it possible to put together evaluation *within* the service, which appears essential for quality improvement and is the core of a participatory procedure, with evaluation *of* the service, which is needed in order to ensure the quality of the overall system of services at a governance level?

The answers to these questions are all linked to how we think that democracy can be realized in a complex society (Moss, 2007a).

## Next steps

The strong relationship envisaged in Principle 7 between methods to be used in evaluating services for young children and the political and ethical (participatory and democratic) dimension of evaluation represents a very real challenge for European society.

In most European countries different institutional levels and a variety of stakeholders are involved in decision-making about young children's services and all of them are to be involved in evaluating their quality. The issue at stake is whether and how these different levels can be related.

A framework of values and educational and goals established within participatory democratic contexts at a national or regional level of governance is certainly needed. However, this does not necessarily restrict the space for the expression of diverse values and goals and the definition of specific objectives in other participatory contexts at local level, provided that a feedback loop could be established. The relationships among the constructs made in the different participatory contexts should be envisaged as a spiral process, which allows ample scope for meaning making and discussion about the goals and objectives to be pursued as well as about how to achieve them.

#### EVALUATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN SWEDEN

In 1998, the Swedish services for young children were transferred to the educational system and a curriculum was provided which set out the fundamental values and goals of early childhood education. In 2004 and 2008, the National Agency for Education made two national evaluations of this reform by means of inspection visits to the services and interviews with teachers and municipal school managers. The service's compliance with the regulations and the determinants of any malfunctioning were ascertained. The evaluation was also aimed at verifying whether the educational activities were based on values expressed in the national curriculum. On this point, the reports found that the services frequently misunderstood what the curriculum had indicated as 'goals to strive for' as being instead steps to be achieved compulsorily, and put excessive pressure on children and teachers. This misunderstanding highlights the tension between educational values and concrete objectives as well as between the definition of quality at a governance level and at a service level.

A priority condition for putting such a process into practice is designing an evaluation system that will network the various participatory contexts according to rigorous democratic procedures. All the stakeholders (from the children's parents and service staff to governing agencies at different levels of governance) should participate in different contexts and express and discuss their judgements from their different perspectives as users, providers, or controllers. The use of documentation will guarantee a common basis for anchoring discussion to concrete matters as well as making judgements transparent for everybody. Thus, self evaluation and external evaluation procedures will find a point of convergence and integration and eventually demonstrate

that judgements expressed by internal and external evaluators are not necessarily contradictory.

#### A SYSTEM OF PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION IN ITALY

In Italy, the most recent regulations have set out accreditation procedures for services that wish to apply for public funding. A major debate and some experiences have been conducted in order to elaborate adequate procedures for defining the quality standards required to obtain accreditation and for evaluating their implementation by the services. In the period 2004-2009 the Municipality of Rome, with the collaboration of the National Research Council, implemented a system of evaluation of the quality of accredited services for young children with the two-fold aim of improving practices and assessing the services' compliance with accreditation rules (Di Giandomenico, Musatti, & Picchio, 2008). This system provided procedures for documenting, analysing and expressing judgements on educational quality and involved the professionals, coordinators, parents, and municipal managers within a structured participatory framework, in which each stakeholder was required to express their judgement about the practices that had been documented from the different perspectives of their role and status (as service providers, users, and administrators).

Ample scope was provided for comparison, discussion and integration of different points of view and judgements. The system also required a final assessment of the outcomes of the participatory process carried out during the year and a plan for quality improvement.

This process of documenting, analysing, and evaluating the service quality has the potential to open new perspectives for understanding children's rights and needs and finding new societal and educational answers. The scientific knowledge already acquired about children's early development and education should interact with this process of meaning making (Moss, 2007b) and play a critical role in highlighting the relations between educational general goals and specific objectives and the practices followed in each context.

Obviously there is not just one way to design such a system. Cultural variability and values as well as the different organization of participation and the power relations among stakeholders in each context should all be considered.

Anyway, two major assumptions should be made clear. First, the dual nature of evaluation of young children's services has to be acknowledged: equal importance should be attached to evaluation aimed at improvement of practice and to evaluation aimed at assessing compliance

with regulations and standards. The two goals should be closely connected in the responsible judgement of all the stakeholders. They are the two faces of the same coin that has to be spent for guaranteeing children's rights and their present and future well-being.

#### A RECIPROCAL COMMITMENT TO IMPROVE QUALITY IN BELGIUM

The French Community of Belgium established a Code of Quality (*Code de qualité*, 1999; 2004) whereby it introduced quality certification for services for children aged 0-3 that will meet some structural and process standards. Certification implies a service commitment to put forward a quality improvement plan to surpass the standards. In order to support discussion and autonomous experimentation by service staff, the Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance, which is the governmental agency with responsibility for young children and families in the French Community of Belgium, issued a document of educational guidelines and three brochures that present and depict some best educational practices to implement these guidelines (ONE, 2004). Accordingly, ONE has launched a program whereby its pedagogical personnel accompany and support the services' autonomous initiatives and evaluations. This experience highlights the importance of establishing specific procedures for supporting local discussion and networking services.

The second assumption is even more crucial. Throughout the evaluation process all opinions should be taken into account and respected and none of the stakeholders should believe they know "what is good for everybody and for ever". This assumption entails another major question about the respect for cultural diversity in pedagogical approaches and in educational values and practices. This question emerges dramatically in many European countries, where early childhood professionalism, which has developed within homogeneous cultural approaches, is now encountering a variety of educational cultures represented by families.

Answering this question calls for new reflections and experiences (Vanderbroeck, 1999) and represents the greatest challenge for achieving quality in services for young children as well as for defining and evaluating it.

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