



TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Evaluation issues in Early Childhood Education and Care: Choices and Implications
for Diverse Populations

Fourth Meeting: June 30 – July 2, 2014

Synthesis report

Setting the scene

The multiple beneficial effects of ECEC for children and families, especially the more disadvantaged ones, have been well illustrated and described by research worldwide (See [Vandenbroeck&Lazarri](#)). But, this positive impact depends on whether the provision deliver high quality services. To monitor the required quality level, adequate evaluation and monitoring is necessary. And this is quite a complex issue.

The 4th TFIEY meeting focused on evaluating ECEC services. What needs to be evaluated and how do we do that: the outcomes, the impact, the process? Who decides what should be evaluated? Why do we need evaluation and whose interests does it serve? What kind of evidence is valid enough? What method should be used? How can evaluations be related to issues of migration and poverty? (See [Barnett, Boomsma, Benedetti](#))

As generating support for high quality ECEC is necessary, positive evaluations can definitely add to the advocacy efforts to convince policymakers that ECEC is indeed an investment for the whole society and not a cost. At the same time, monitoring and evaluating results can explain what has been done with public funds and whether the defined targets were achieved. Other stakeholders as well (parents, children, ECEC staff, partnering sectors...) are entitled to know whether programs and services are effective and whether quality is ensured.

We also need to look into monitoring systems that are sensitive to the situation of the not-so-middleclass families and their needs in ECEC. While not every standard program will work for everyone, a case can be made that, what works for vulnerable groups, will usually benefit all.

Throughout the evaluation debate, caution is needed. Findings may differ depending on the method used. Research (See [OECD review](#)) also points out that it is very hard to isolate and identify the impact of one given evaluation tool or method because quality is such a complex issue and a result of different aspects and experiences within and beyond a given ECEC service. It is, in other words, 'difficult to attribute causality between a monitoring process or practice and quality'.

In this synthesis report we cover the main issues, that were discussed. For illustrations and presentations of concrete examples, (research) projects and evaluation systems, we refer to the contributions on the TFIEY website (See [TFIEY](#))



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TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Evaluate WHAT?

ECEC quality is never a given; it needs constant attention and efforts towards improvement. Evaluation of ECEC programs and services often points at the expected outcomes and outputs. Did children actually develop a richer vocabulary? Are they doing better in school? ...But, evaluation should be more than that. A 360° view on evaluation is needed. It is important to illustrate the complete scope: not only measure or show what outcomes for children could be, but also what contributes to good service delivery or to staff quality, how services are delivered, how families are reached, how quality can be maintained.... Sometimes, what made a program successful, doesn't only have to do with the outcomes but can depend on the level of commitment, the inspiring leadership, the style, the personal relationships. These elements are not always so easy to grasp or measure, but they often do make the difference. Facts and figures are important, but so are the processes and interactions. Merely assessing whether a child can count to 20 (or not), doesn't say much about his or her well-being. Proving that parental involvement did in fact increase, doesn't explain why this happened. Such 360° view also includes keeping an eye on how the (local) context is also changing. When serving certain target groups (e.g. a specific ethnic minority), or trying to tackle certain problems (e.g. poverty), we need to keep an eye on the changes of these groups and issues.

A salient factor in quality is the competence of the staff, both the leadership and the practitioners. This becomes clear in several major, systemic evaluations (e.g. NCKO in the Netherlands, the Sure start evaluation in the UK). However, information on how this quality level can be reached and maintained, is rather thin.

Other questions that need to be addressed, are e.g.: what standard is being used (often the middle-class standard is used as the golden standard), who is compared to whom, what about the danger of ethnic-linguistic-cultural bias, who decides what outcomes to look for? Evaluating practice should also monitor the broader impact (including possible unwanted side-effects), processes and implementation. And even so, defining the topic of evaluation in itself is not neutral. If we say e.g. that migrant children's language and pro-social behavior has improved, are we then problematizing these children from the start?

Evaluation also has to do with the content of the ECEC services and with what definition of quality is being used (See [Benedetti](#), [Ionescu](#), [Bondioli](#)).

In several presentations, elements to look into as aspects of quality were e.g.:

- Having a clear and explicit pedagogical project, negotiated with all stakeholders
- The relationship between children and practitioners (sensitive responsiveness)
- The involvement of parents as first educators
- The material environment, including the use of outside space
- The group dynamic
- The level of training of practitioners and continuous professional development, more specifically on (dealing with) diversity
- Building partnerships
- ...





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

On EU level¹, extensive work is being done on drafting a 'European Quality Framework of ECEC', which is planned to be finalized by the end of 2014. Access and inclusion/diversity are considered to be part of ECEC quality, besides workforce preparation and training, curriculum and parental involvement, monitoring in the best interest of the child and governance and funding.

In addition, working with diverse and more vulnerable populations, add some more challenges. There is the issue of cultural bias in (standardized) tests, as well as the additional barriers that migrant and low-income families experience². Examples of these barriers are: being unfamiliar with (division of) tasks and conventions, discomfort in educational settings, language and trust barriers, forms of respect for teachers and professionals (as having a higher status). This can influence the validity of results: when inadequate methods or tools are used, the result loses relevance. E.g. whereas narrative assessment can surely be more inclusive in general, it can be problematic for verbally weaker respondents or respondent with another native language.

Evaluate WHY?

Evaluations can serve different, sometimes conflicting, agendas.

For policymakers it is important to see an effective use of public funds, especially in times of economic downturn. Monitoring and evaluation reports can also support policymakers in the choices they want to make for the future.

Families and children would want for ECEC services to really answer to their needs and expectations and that the quality level remains stable or improves. The mere concept of quality also needs to be defined together with the main users of ECEC. Especially looking at families in the context of poverty and migration, it is important to monitor (unwanted) effects of exclusion.

For the professionals as well, it is important to have a good view on the quality of their work and to know what works or how they can improve their practice.

Influencing policy

The case was made that monitoring and evaluations could maybe have a stronger impact on policies if it would move beyond the mere measuring of outcomes. These are not always as available, as convincing, as relevant in the long run as one would hope. Illustrating results of certain processes, of a given local approach, of a type of leadership, of a level of training can be as important and enlightening for policymakers to better understand what really works in ECEC. Several examples were given to illustrate this. (See [Litjens](#), [Fukkink](#), [BockFamulla](#), [Boomsma](#) and [Barnett](#)) Both the German and Dutch example clearly show how systemic quality monitoring can influence policies, which in turn influence quality of service delivery on the work floor.

¹ See e.g. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/495867/IPOL-CULT_ET\(2013\)495867_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/495867/IPOL-CULT_ET(2013)495867_EN.pdf)

² See e.g. [Tobin](#) during the 2nd TFIEY meeting.





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

However, monitoring and evaluating results alone will not always lead to the wanted or needed change. Between reports on quality and policy decisions stands reality: economic crises, political convictions and the need to make choices in spending,

Reporting on monitoring and evaluation, informing different stakeholders

The results of evaluations often don't get widely published or debated, even though this is also important. The use of media e.g. can support the evaluation outcomes and policymakers can use this, either to favour expansion and continue support or to push for policy reform and additional resources.

In doing so, a certain translation is needed to make it more understandable, accessible and convincing. A common language needs to be developed and clarity on vision, purpose and values within ECEC needs to be given. The mere sharing of evaluation results has to be completed: drawing the (local) context, explaining on how and why the evaluation was done, why certain choices were made.

Telling the truth, naming the issue, is also vital. If e.g. problems such as lack of access, poor quality services for the poor, not reaching unserved groups (who may benefit the most) are not openly discussed, solutions will not surface either.

Maintain and improve quality, share knowledge, learn from one another

One of the main reasons to evaluate and monitor practices and services, is of course, keeping an eye on the quality of the work, learning where and how improvements can be made and reflecting on practices and current issues. In order to make this possible, evaluations shouldn't be judging but rather stimulating and supporting. In the Italian example (See [Benedetti](#) and [Bondioli](#)) this is clearly illustrated. By means of reflective, self-assessing methods, teams of practitioners can receive a form of support and competence building, while the use of discussion and negotiation on the concept of quality within an open context of cooperation reduces competition. The focus is the sharing of ideas and views, not an idea of who is winning.

Monitoring and evaluating systems do not only report on the positive and negative aspects of practice. It can also point at where the gaps are, suggest in what areas improvement is possible. It should function, as Barnett stated, like a GPS: not pointing to who got us lost, but to what it takes to reach the set goal.

Evaluate HOW?

Different elements of ECEC ask for different evaluating methods. (See [OECD review](#)) E.g. work processes, levels of parental involvement, well-being of children will need to be monitored in a different way than for example access rates or personnel turnover. Just to give one example: there is a positive link between the use of non-formal practices and child outcome and quality (e.g. the use of portfolios resulted in a significant improvement of classroom quality in Head Start). OECD gave the following overview of what methods are most frequently used for evaluating which aspect of quality :





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

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

Considering the different methods of evaluation, there is a tendency to install a certain hierarchy. This should be avoided, given the fact that different aspects of ECEC are best evaluated through different methods. It is advisable to look for the most appropriate method, linked to what needs to be monitored. All methods have their strong and weaker points. It is also important to consider the Different levels of 'evidence', of validity. Expert opinions are certainly valuable but can be less persuasive or more biased, depending in the context in which they are used.

Several presentations pointed at some conditions for adequate monitoring and evaluating, such as:

- It is advisable to begin with a clear goal and plan, to have developers and researchers work closely together with practitioners and policymakers from the start, to also explore long term effects besides the short term outcomes and to measure implementation as well as outcomes (See [Barnett](#)).
- Assessing or screening the personal interactions (staff/children/parents) should be a major part of evaluating ECEC quality (See [Fukkink](#) on the 'CIP' scales, Caregiver Interaction Profile).
- Before measuring quality, quality needs to be defined, practical relevance needs to be ensured, evaluators need to be well trained, piloting before implementing is strongly advised, cultural and other differences in the groups needs to be taken into account and results should be disseminated and linked to the purpose (See [Litjens](#)).
- To get all perspective covered, all stakeholders should be involved and the local context should be clearly understood.

Discussions on methodology add some tensions to the evaluation debate. E.g. on the tension between standardization (ideal world) and diversity (real world), between quantitative evaluation and the need to apply participative methods, between RCT methods with control groups and the ethical issue of exclusion, between the need for cost-effectiveness and the cost of evaluating long term interventions...

More particularly, in the context of poverty and migration , we need to be aware of certain barriers that these families face (unfamiliar, respect, language, lack of trust, fatalism...)





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Participatory approaches

Monitoring and evaluating gains relevance when the directly concerned parties can be involved in the process. If not, the risk of making the wrong assumptions is very present.

Powerful examples of participatory evaluation methods were discussed in a breakout session. Participation of stakeholders/interested parties can happen in different ways. It is essential that conditions are in place for participants to really speak their mind and that they can really give input, given their position, abilities and perspectives. Users in general, and more vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in particular, more often find themselves in a position of dependency or unfamiliarity with the context. Designing respectful and adequately adapted ways to participate are a necessity here, so they can actually feel safe and valued in the process. No assumptions should be made and the level of participation and follow-up, or consequences, of the results must be clearly explained.

The children themselves can also be involved, observed, documented, even when they are very young and not (yet) verbally strong (See [Laevers](#)). The SICS scale, a Self-evaluation Instrument for Care Settings, provides a step by step procedure in which well-being and involvement of every child in a childcare setting is described and documented. It deals with both child, context and circumstantial factors such as the offer of activities, room for initiative, group climate etc. and gives provisions a practical instrument to see on what quality level they are operating and where they can improve. Children are being 'screened' individually as well as in the group and on given moments in time so the changes can also be documented.

Parents as well can and should play their role in monitoring quality of ECEC, both on the outcome and the process level. This should go beyond the obligatory annual satisfaction questionnaire but involve them from start to finish and continue to feed into the discussion on the quality and the service, on feedback on the results, on meaning making. Creativity and sensitivity is needed to reach out to the most vulnerable parents to make them feel safe enough to participate in an authentic way. Working with focus groups, interviews etc. can be very valuable here.

Staff members are equally valued actors on quality monitoring. Methods of peer evaluation and self-evaluation (See [Antulic](#) , [Bondioli](#)) can add to the quality level of the service, heightening awareness, reflecting on practice, clarifying and debating on issues and, in short, add to the collective process of meaning-making. Self-evaluating and reflecting can thus serve both a function of quality improvement and continuous professional development. It also tends to lead the way to solutions that are actually feasible, not only advisable in theory.

The reported effects of monitoring staff quality seem to go either way: examples were mentioned where this had no real impact on quality as such, while in other settings it did positively influence aspects of quality (e.g. higher awareness of children's needs or better language skills).

Self-evaluating methods can also vary, going from measuring instruments or by (pedagogical) support of a kind of facilitator, as it has been developed and implemented in the Emilia Romagna region in Italy (See





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

[Bondioli](#)). In these settings quality is being negotiated in a participative and democratic way among all stakeholders. It involves reflective discussions on context, habits, behaviour, working methods and leads to a co-constructed idea on quality and movement towards change and improvement through a step by step methodology. This whole process is accompanied by a well-trained facilitator, who supports this process of 'promotion from within'.

Evaluating for diversity

Whereas assessing young children already is a critical issue in itself, sometimes too focused on school readiness only, it gets even more complex in a context of diversity. Still, sometimes we may need to evaluate a program on children's outcomes to see if children, especially the most vulnerable ones, gain something with it (See [Frede](#)). In those cases however, the tools that are used need to take into account the effect of diverse backgrounds of children, e.g. the use of language. The tools and the reason for the assessment need to be clear, the underlying values need to be made explicit, the children's background needs to be well known. Assessing without taking all this into account will not in itself improve their educational outcomes.

A useful tools can be found at ISSA, International Step by Step Association (See [Ionescu](#)). Diversity and inclusion are fundamental elements in their view of quality and these issues as such are included throughout the focus areas, principles and indicators of quality in a tool that has been developed for ECEC practitioners. This professional development tool can be used as a self-assessment tool, as a group assessment tool, as well as a tool for mentors or to monitor and rate childworker's practices.

The research on effects of ECEC for children in more vulnerable contexts (poverty, migration...) shows that the gains seem to be larger than in general, but still, some programs seem more effective than others. The most difficult question to figure out is, what actually makes the difference? (See [Barnett](#))

Takeways: 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.
- Evaluations do matter but evaluations alone will not change quality of ECEC services
- Use language that makes sense and that takes into account the broader context
- Supporting, reflective and participative methods can lead to more culturally sensitive monitoring than standardized, more judging 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
- 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.





TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

- Involvement and recognition of all stakeholders is necessary
- The impact of a monitoring practice is difficult to identify
- 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
- Between research and policy stand ... opinions, political decisions and commitment, which are also needed



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