

*From "European Education Area Strategic Framework -
Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)
Activity report (2022-2023)"
2024 by European Commission*

1. Background

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been an important priority in the European education agenda for several years as showcased by the following key policy documents:

- the Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC Systems of May 2019,
- the Commission's Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 of September 2020 – the EEA Communication, and
- the Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and Beyond (2021-2030) of February 2021 – the Council Resolution.

Within the context of the European Education Area (EEA) strategic framework, the working group on early childhood education and care (ECEC WG) supports EU member states to implement the European Quality Framework for ECEC, which is a key part of the 2019 Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC Systems. The general objective of the working group is to promote mutual learning on policy reforms of ECEC systems.

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2. Monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC

2.1. Why focussing on M&E?

The European Quality Framework for ECEC describes five pillars that support the provision of quality education and care to young children, one of which is M&E – besides access, staff, curriculum, and governance and funding.

As noted in the Background note on Monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC, M&E are key components of improving quality in ECEC systems. By highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of ECEC provision, M&E processes can act as catalysts for change to support stakeholders and policymakers in undertaking initiatives that respond to the needs of children, parents, and local communities.

There is a consensus among researchers and policymakers that by systematically linking data collection, research, ongoing evaluation and policy action, M&E processes can lead to the continuous improvement of ECEC provision as well as to the enhancement of children's well-being, development and learning. Accordingly, an increasing number of countries in Europe are in the process of developing or improving systems for monitoring and evaluating quality in the ECEC sector.

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2.2.

Methodology

The ECEC WG agreed to discuss three core topics, based on key questions which guided the definition of the 2022-2023 work programme.

1. Purposes and values of monitoring and evaluation of quality in ECEC

- What are the possible main purposes (objectives) of M&E of quality in ECEC?
- What are the values which can/should underpin M&E of quality in ECEC, and how can they be included in M&E processes?
- How can M&E processes make ECEC systems more inclusive for all children?

2. Coordinating monitoring and evaluation efforts across levels

- How to coordinate M&E processes and tools across all levels of the system (centre, local, regional and national), incl. in split systems?
- How can we ensure that M&E results are effectively and efficiently used to improve ECEC policies and the quality of ECEC provision across all levels of the system and horizontally across split systems?
- How to ensure that M&E results are available and useful to all stakeholders?

3. Involvement of stakeholders, including children and families in monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC

- What are the benefits and the methods to involve children, families, staff and other stakeholders in M&E quality in ECEC?

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2.3. Main findings

The ECEC WG produced four key outputs between 2022-2023 with a focus on M&E:

- Monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC: Purposes, Values and Principles (2022);
- Improving the governance of monitoring and evaluation of quality in ECEC (2023);
- Involving children, parents, staff and stakeholders in monitoring & evaluation of quality in ECEC (2023);
- Making Early Childhood Education and Care more inclusive through monitoring and evaluation of quality (2023).

The findings of these reports are summarised in detail below.

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2.3.1. Purposes, values and principles of M&E

Monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC: Purposes, Values and Principles (2022) is the first report of the ECEC WG, addressing the following key questions:

- What are the possible main purposes (objectives) of M&E of quality in ECEC?
- What are the values which can/should underpin M&E of quality in ECEC, and how can they be included in M&E processes?

The report first focuses on the purposes of M&E of quality in ECEC, including quality control, quality improvement and policy learning, as seen on the figure below. Whereas quality control aims to ensure that ECEC provision adheres to mandatory national and sub-national quality standards or legislations, quality improvement goes beyond this, striving to support continuous reflection and developments towards better quality in ECEC settings. M&E also aims to foster the democratic participation of children and parents, staff and other stakeholders to guide policy learning, reforms, and initiatives through creating evidence on the quality of strengths and weaknesses of ECEC provision and systems.

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. This would foster a sense of purpose and motivation among staff, and shift M&E from an emphasis on adhering to minimum quality standards to a focus on striving to improve ECEC policies for the benefit of children.

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2.3.2. Improving the governance of M&E

Improving the governance of monitoring and evaluation of quality in ECEC (2023) is the second report of the ECEC WG, exploring the second core topic on the best ways to coordinate and streamline M&E processes across the centre and system levels. More specifically, the output focuses the following key questions:

- How can we ensure that M&E processes and results are effectively and efficiently used to improve ECEC policies and the quality of ECEC provision across all levels of the system and horizontally across split systems?
- How to coordinate M&E processes and tools across all levels of the system (centre, local, regional and national), including in split systems?

The report first delves into the potential benefits of investing in coordinated approaches to the M&E of quality in ECEC provision. A focus on improving structural quality must go hand in hand with enhancing process quality. To improve the entire ECEC system, aspects of both structural and process quality have to be made visible and easy to interpret to all stakeholders involved. Setting up robust data systems and developing coordinated M&E processes – with aligned tools and feedback loops across all levels – are therefore essential to support quality improvement throughout the levels of ECEC systems.

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2.3.3. Involving children, staff, families and other stakeholders in the M&E of quality in ECEC

Involving children, parents, staff and stakeholders in monitoring & evaluation of quality in ECEC (2023) is the third report of the ECEC WG. It investigates how a variety of stakeholders could be meaningfully involved in M&E processes to increase the inclusiveness and quality of ECEC systems.

The report's introductory section focuses on the importance and benefits of involving various groups into M&E processes in ECEC, drawing on values, rights-based arguments and practical reasons. Since each group can provide unique insights based on their specific position with regards to the ECEC system, their diverse inputs contribute to creating a 'full picture' of ECEC quality.

It reviews how children, parents, staff and stakeholders are being involved in the M&E of ECEC across Europe. This is done via a mapping of the requirements / guidelines aimed at the involvement of these stakeholders and how these differ across the age ranges of ECEC; and by presenting various methods used around Europe to include different stakeholders in the M&E of ECEC.

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2.3.4. M&E and inclusion

Making Early Childhood Education and Care more inclusive through monitoring and evaluation of quality (2023) is the fourth report of the ECEC WG exploring the objectives, challenges and practices to collect information and data which inform policymaking when it comes to making ECEC policies, systems and settings more inclusive.

The report underlines that there are numerous policies, projects and practices across Europe aiming to support the participation of vulnerable children in ECEC, and that it is important to monitor their implementation and efficiency. Accordingly, current practices to evaluate the visibility and efficiency of inclusive policies are examined, followed by a collection of basic principles for the M&E of quality in ECEC, and potential pitfalls to avoid. Recommended approaches for successfully evaluating inclusive policies include that when designing M&E processes, attention must be paid to the values that support the ECEC system. It is also important to collect data on the inclusiveness of ECEC settings and ensure that the M&E processes consider the views and experiences of all children.