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Chapter 2
The Importance of Evaluating Early Childhood Education Quality to Support the Learning of Young Children

Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola, Jonna Kangas, Matthew Manning, and Susanne Garvis

Abstract High quality early childhood is important for all young children. Some countries have tried to enhance quality with guidelines around structural quality (such as group size or teacher qualifications) or process quality (interactions with children) within formal regulatory environments. This study provides a descriptive comparison of Finland and Australia regarding formalized controlled regulations around early childhood quality, comparing different standards in relation to quality. The comparative review also explores the different regulatory strategies implemented in relation to quality improvement from different policies and laws. In the final section, key ideas for policy makers are shared around the importance of having degree qualified early childhood and opportunities for professional learning for early childhood to support structural and process quality.

Keywords Early Childhood Education · Quality Evaluation · Comparative Research · Educational Policy · Australian Early Childhood Education · Finnish Early Childhood Education

2.1 Introduction

Many countries around the world strive for quality within early childhood education and care. This has led to the development of policies and regulations based on ideas

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around structural and process quality to help establish and sustain quality practices. The focus on quality improvement is based on producing the best possible learning environment to support children's learning and development. The level of government regulation in developing measures for quality varies internationally, largely dependent on a countries perceived culture around governance and compliance.

In this chapter, we explore assessment and evaluation policies to enhance quality in two divergent countries, Australia, and Finland. Both countries are committed to quality early childhood education and care, however, the countries differ when it comes to how policy is legislated, supported, and managed. Drawing on the knowledge and skills of experts in each country, we provide a descriptive comparison that is useful to show variation at both policy and implementation level. We also show divergence around governance, based on cultural and contextual understanding.

In the final section of this chapter, we expand on a commonality to both countries-the importance of degree qualified early childhood teachers. Previous research has shown the importance of having qualified staff to support the work of quality improvement to create highly engaging and educational learning environments. We also expand on this idea, suggesting professional learning is another area of need to support and sustain quality improvements to support the learning of all children. Our postulations are also directed toward policy makers to understand the importance of funding sustained development of life-long learning for early childhood teachers.

2.2 Focus of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore differences in evaluation and assessment policies in Australia and Finland that are designed to enhance quality in early childhood education and care. To support this, we chose a method of descriptive comparison, to allow exploration of policies and practice in a form of document interrogation. As such, our research question was:

How does Australia and Finland compare in assessment and evaluation policies to enhance quality within early childhood education and care?

In the beginning of the project, we chose three criteria to explore in relation to the evaluation to provide opportunities for comparison. These were:

1. Evaluation and assessment policies
2. Structures of evaluation and assessment
3. Documentation as a core activity of assessment and evaluation

Each country had different policies and regulations, so it was important that a thorough investigation was first conducted to determine all relevant documents. Given there were two researchers in each country, regular discussion and reflection were conducted to ensure all suitable documents were obtained. After this, documents were screened for relevant information based on the criteria listed above. We again engaged in rigorous discussion to ensure the meaning of the policies and practices were correct. The continuous dialogue between researchers allowed opportunities to

reflect on policies within each country as well as compare similar practices within early childhood education and care.

We begin with a description of Australia, before sharing a description of Finland. In the findings, key areas are identified to highlight similarities and differences, largely based on cultural differences.

2.3 Assessment and Evaluation Policies and Process in the Australian Early Childhood Education System

2.3.1 Background

Early childhood education and care have undergone significant reforms in Australia since the turn of the decade. Early childhood services cater for children aged birth to 5 years. Much of this has been in response to trying to improve the quality of early childhood education and care and previous structural problems such as early childhood service collapses such as the ABC network of early childhood settings throughout Australia. The ABC network was a company listed on the stock exchange, with over 1200 centers and 120,000 children attending (including 16,000 staff) at the time of its' collapse and liquidation around 2008 (Ellis, 2009). The collapse of a large early childhood provider, who had 25% market share, led to numerous criticisms and controversy from various stakeholders regarding early childhood education as a for-profit industry and questions around actual quality.

Considering the criticisms that shadowed the industry, Australia set out to transform the system with the overall goal of becoming a world leader in providing high quality early childhood education and care. A key milestone in reaching this goal was the endorsement of the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy- Investing in the Early Years (2009)* by the Council of Australian Governments. The Strategy proposed six priority areas for changed including:

1. Strengthening universal maternal, child, and family health services;
2. Providing support for vulnerable children;
3. Engaging parents and the community in understanding the importance of early childhood development;
4. Improving early childhood infrastructure;
5. Strengthening the workforce across ECD and family support services; and
6. Building better information and a solid evidence base.

In 2010, the Council of Australian Governments agreed to a *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*, which established a National Quality Standard from 2012 to ensure consistency in the provision of high-quality care across all Australian states and territories (COAG, 2009). Extending beyond short-term direct outcomes associated with high-quality education and care,

the Australian Government (2013) now recognized an empirically tested positive association between high-quality education and care (including health and familial wellbeing)—particularly targeting important transition points in human development—and determinants of future health and human capital development (Garvis & Manning, 2017). The national focus also included the development of an agreed national learning framework for Australia- *Belonging, being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning and Development Framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). According to the Framework (DEEWR, p. 5) the aim is to:

> form the foundation for ensuring that children in all early childhood education and care settings experience quality teaching and learning. It has a specific emphasis on play-based learning and recognises the importance of communication and language (including early literacy and numeracy) and social and emotional development. The Framework has been designed for use by early childhood educators working in partnership with families, children's first and most influential educators.

All early childhood services educators in Australia are now expected to engage with the Early Years Learning and Development Framework (EYLF), working toward implementing the five outcomes for children:

1. Children have a strong sense of identity;
2. Children are connected with and contribute to their world;
3. Children have a strong sense of identity;
4. Children are confident and involved learners; and
5. Children are effective communicators.

However, the framework received criticism around notions of intentional teaching. Leggett and Ford (2013, p. 43), for example, postulate that

> what is lacking in the EYLF documents is a focus on a broader definition for intentionality that explores both the intended teaching acts of educators and the intentional learning of children.

In their study of 6 educators, Leggett and Ford found that intentional teaching was routinely discussed only around knowledge acquisition as a whole group activity. Recent state initiatives have tried to provide greater understanding around intentional teaching with specific professional learning programs and resources.

2.3.2 Evaluation and Assessment Policies

The National Quality Standard (NQS), now firmly embedded in the Australian early learning sector, is designed to set a high national benchmark for early childhood education and care as we all outside school hours services. Seven quality areas were designed that were deemed highly important for the outcomes of children. These are education program and practice, children's health and safety, physical environment, staffing arrangements, relationships with children, collaborative partnerships with

families and communities and governance and leadership. A summary of these areas is provided below in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Quality areas deemed important with regard to the outcomes of children

Quality area	Standards and elements
1. Education program and practice	1.1 Program 1.1.1 Approved learning framework 1.1.2 Child-centered 1.1.3 Program learning opportunities 1.2 Practice 1.2.1 Intentional teaching 1.2.2 Responsive teaching and scaffolding 1.2.3 child directed learning 1.3 Assessment and Planning 1.3.1 Assessment and planning cycle 1.3.2 Critical reflection 1.3.3 Information for families
2. Children's health and safety	2.1 Health 2.1.1 Wellbeing and comfort 2.1.2 Health practices and procedures 2.1.3 Healthy lifestyle 2.2 Safety 2.2.1 Supervision 2.2.2 Incident and emergency management 2.2.3 Child protection
3. Physical environment	3.1 Design 3.1.1 Fit for purpose 3.1.2 Upkeep 3.2 Use 3.2.1 Inclusive environment 3.2.2 Resources support play-based learning 3.2.3 Environmentally responsive
4. Staffing arrangements	4.1 Staffing arrangements 4.1.1 Organization of educators 4.1.2 Continuity of staff 4.2 Professionalism 4.2.1 Professional collaboration 4.2.2 Professional standards

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

Quality area	Standards and elements
5. Relationships with children	5.1 Relationships between educators and children 5.1.1 Positive educator to child interactions 5.1.2 Dignity and rights of the child 5.2 Relationship between children 5.2.1 Collaborative learning 5.2.2 Self-regulation
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities	6.1 Supportive relationships with families 6.1.1 Engagement with the service 6.1.2 Parent views are respected 6.1.3 Families are supported 6.2 Collaborative partnerships 6.2.1 Transitions 6.2.2 Access and participation 6.2.3 Community engagement
7. Governance and leadership	7.1 Governance 7.1.1 Service philosophy and purpose 7.1.2 Management systems 7.1.3 Roles and responsibilities 7.2 Leadership 7.2.1 Continuous improvement 7.2.2 Educational leadership 7.2.3 Development of professionals

Based on the above quality areas, an early learning service is first audited and then given a rating based on how they have met each quality area. This occurs every two years and the rating must be always displayed. All ratings are also available on a national public register. A service provider can receive one of the following ratings as set out by ACECQA:

1. Excellent rating, awarded by ACECQA
2. Exceeding National Quality Standard
3. Meeting National Quality Standard
4. Working Toward National Quality Standard
5. Significant Improvement Required

According to Garvis and Manning (2017), the intention of the ratings is to provide transparency, accountability and create an atmosphere of responsibility on the part of the provider to the public. The intention (although not explicitly stated) is to create a

free-market mechanism in which parents act as free agents (consumers in this case) in the market, discriminating between high- and low-quality services and thus creating an incentive for service providers to create high quality early education and care. However, as that there are waiting lists for entry given the limited places available, the ability for parents to act in this manner has so far been limited. Parents may in fact choose location as a key factor in decision-making around early childhood services.

Services that are below the standard will be monitored to try and improve and achieve acceptable levels of quality. In a recent snapshot of ratings (ACECQA, 2021), ACECQA reports that the proportion of services meeting or above National Quality Standard has risen to 86%. Overall the figures have improved since the introduction of the rating system.

2.3.3 Structures of Evaluation and Assessment

Within Australia, there have been many changes to improve structural qualities within early childhood education and care. These have been based on teacher qualifications, group size, and formal regulatory bodies (see section above). The idea is that the regulatory bodies also assess process quality through site visits and evaluations that determine the overall quality rating of the service. Ratios (staff to child) have been introduced to provide structural quality across the sector. The ratios required for center-based services are:

- Children aged birth to 24 months—1 educator to 4 children
- Children aged 24 months to 36 months—1 educator to 5 children (4 children in Victoria)
- Children aged 36 months and up 1 educator to 11 children (10 children in New South Wales, Tasmania, and Victoria).

In the last decade, there has been a movement toward universal access for children. The goal (although not particularly well examined) is to provide 15 h a week access to a high-quality learning program to be delivered in the year before formal schooling (school starts at age five). In some states and territories, this how now been extended to two years before formal schooling (for 3 years old and 4-year-old). There is national agreement that the program must be delivered by degree qualified (bachelor) early childhood teachers. As such, this has created a strong demand for degree qualified early childhood teachers across Australia, with an expected shortage in every state and territory. Transition plans were developed across all states and territories in relation to the introduction of early childhood teachers based on the differences across the different states and territories. Since the transition plans, some states have also begun providing two years of early childhood education before the start of school with a qualified early childhood teacher. As yet, one year of early childhood education is national government policy.

2.3.4 Documentation as a Core Activity of Assessment and Evaluation

As part of the National Quality Standards, all early childhood providers must ensure they have a Quality Improvement Plan in place. The aim of a Quality Improvement Plan is to self-assess performance in delivery quality within early childhood education and care and to allow planning for future improvements. Furthermore, there is regulation in place that states a Quality Improvement Plan must be updated every year and available on request by the regulatory authority or parents.

2.3.5 Documentation of Children's Learning

As part of enhancing quality in early childhood education, children's learning and development are also documented. According to the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009, p. 37), "rich documentation incorporates multiple perspectives and makes learning visible to the community." Teachers are encouraged to explore a range of methods to determine what is best for the child, family, service, and community. The aim is to gather and analyze information about children's learning and to plan and evaluate accordingly.

There are currently no mandated templates or programs for documenting children's learning. Early learning services can choose what is suitable. Documentation must be shown to assessors when they visit to undertake audits of quality using the seven standards. The assessor will observe, sight, and discuss documentation to identify if the service is meeting the National Quality Standard and legislative requirements.

2.4 Assessment and Evaluation Policies and Process in the Finnish Early Childhood Education System

2.4.1 Background

Finnish society and policies can be seen to be based on the model of the Nordic welfare. The state's responsibility to provide education, health, welfare, and security is written into the Finnish Constitution, so that citizens are guaranteed the right to income and care. Three core principles can be identified as a basis of all legislation: universalism (i.e., social welfare programs for all citizens), social and human rights (i.e., citizenship as a basis of entitlement and child's rights), and equality (i.e., equal access to services) (Kumpulainen, 2018; Miettinen, 2013). These three are seen essential in the Finnish policies and decision-making and state the state plays an

important role in developing and managing welfare policies through services steering processes.

Early childhood education in Finland aims to the implementation of ten overall goals of education by the in the Early Childhood Education Act (540/2018) and National Curriculum Guidelines of Early Childhood Education (2018):

1. promote the holistic growth, health, and wellbeing of each child as determined by his or her age and development.
2. support the child's prerequisites for learning and promote his or her lifelong learning and implementation of equality in education.
3. carry out versatile pedagogical activities based on play, physical activity, arts, and cultural heritage and enable positive learning experiences.
4. ascertain that the children's early childhood education and care environment promotes development and learning and is healthy and safe.
5. safeguard an approach that respects children and stable interaction relationships between the children and the ECEC personnel.
6. provide all children with equal opportunities for early childhood education and care, promote gender equality as well as help the children develop their capacity to understand and respect the general cultural heritage and each child's linguistic, cultural, religious, and ideological background.
7. recognize the child's need for individual support and provide him or her with appropriate support in early childhood education and care if the need arises, in cross-sectoral cooperation when necessary.
8. develop the child's teamwork and interaction skills, promote the child's ability to act in a peer group as well as guide him or her towards acting responsibly and sustainably, respecting other people and becoming members of the society.
9. ensure that the children get an opportunity to participate and influence matters concerning them.
10. act together with the child as well as the child's parent or other guardian to promote the child's balanced development and holistic wellbeing as well as to support the parent or other guardian in educating the children.

These goals, together with the central values of Finnish education, including for example the intrinsic value of childhood and the Right of the Child by UN, are also reflected in the nation's embrace of a collective responsibility for young children, manifest in diverse policies (Kumpulainen, 2018). National education policy guides educational activities on all levels of the Finnish education system, including ECE (Education & Research 2011–2016, 2012). The basic principle is that all people must have equal access to high-quality education and training. Education is free of charge at all levels from pre-primary to higher education. For day care for 0–5-year-olds, parents pay little according to their incomes and very low-income families have free service in ECE (Kangas et al., 2015). Universal and integrated ECEC services ensure that children—wherever they live and whatever their social, economic, ethnic, or cultural background—have access to a nationally defined and controlled, universally offered ECEC services (Kumpulainen, 2018).

The majority of educational services in Finland is public, but the number of private ECEC services (both commercial for-profit centers and NGO based non-profit centers) has been increasing between years 2012–2020. In 2020, the amount of private ECEC services was around 20% of all early education available. Regardless of these differences, all ECEC service providers must meet Finnish legal requirements: they must adhere to quality measures, follow the national curriculum, and fulfill teacher–child ratios and professional qualifications (Kumpulainen, 2018).

2.4.2 Evaluation and Assessment Policies

In principle, the evaluation and assessment policies and practices in Finland combine with the concept of pedagogical and structural quality of services (Alila, 2013). In Finland, the Finnish Education Evaluation Center (FINEEC) draws up guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of ECE. The municipality and Regional Administrative State Agencies (AVIs) are jointly responsible for overseeing the provision of all ECEC programs in their area. The Finnish legislation (540/2018; National board of education 2018), and national and international research are key factors in the definition process of educational quality of ECE. The main goals and aims in Finnish ECEC have been defined in the Early Childhood Education Act (540/2018) through a heavy education reform the Finnish education system took between years 2012–2018.

The legislation gives the aim of evaluation work in ECEC:

> The purpose of the evaluation of early childhood education and care is to ensure the implementation of the purpose of this Act, support the development of early childhood education and care and promote the conditions for the development, learning and wellbeing of a child. The organiser and provider of early childhood education and care shall evaluate the early childhood education and care they provide and participate in external evaluations of their operations.

2.4.3 Structures of Evaluation and Assessment

The main factors of quality in Finnish ECE can be divisions to structural and process-oriented factors (Vlasov et al., 2018). Structural factors are related to ECE organization at three different levels: national, local (municipal), and school level. Process factors of quality (here by *pedagogical factors*) are the functions of ECEC with a direct link to the child's experiences and classroom activities. The pedagogical dimensions of quality (see Sheridan, 2007) are an important aspect of assessment in early childhood education. There are innumerable methods of pedagogical evaluation with the focus on the teaching, pedagogical interaction, educational activities, and learning environment. The pedagogical activity is evaluated in the school level by teachers and managers, and in collaboration with children and parents based on observation and information produced and documented by different methods (see

Alila et al., 2022). These different factors are related to each other, especially the structural factors affect the pedagogical factors.

Structural factors of quality. The structural factors of quality are related to organization and implementation of ECEC. The national-level structural factors of ECEC create the context and facilities for ECEC and help to ensure that ECEC quality is realized according the steering documents (Vlasov et al., 2018). As structural factors of quality may be regarded the availability, adequacy, accessibility, and inclusiveness of ECEC services. The structural factors of ECEC quality consist for example of; Legislation on early childhood education and care; ECEC curriculum; staff's in-service and continuous training, guidance, and counseling related to ECEC for guardians, ECEC leadership system. In addition, working time structures and planning in ECEC and child group structure and size are structural factors. In Finland, the legislation specifies ECEC staff qualifications and regulates uniform basic training at educational institutions of the field. A well-educated and competent staff is the essential guarantee of developing a high degree of quality in ECEC (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). Guidance and counseling related to ECEC for guardians' support children's access to ECEC services.

The leadership is a meaningful structural factor to evaluate. The leader and leadership influence the organization of ECEC. As a structure, ECEC leadership system has changed in Finland. The areas of duties for directors have expanded; the directors have more ECEC centers of ECEC to lead. This tendency also stresses the meaning of shared pedagogical leadership in ECEC centers (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018).

Pedagogical factors of quality describe the core functions of early childhood pedagogy and a unit's pedagogical operating culture, both of which are directly linked to the child's experiences. The pedagogical factors of quality describe how the objectives and content specified for early childhood education and care are realized in practice. The structural and pedagogical factors of quality interact dynamically and are manifested at different levels of early childhood education and care. Evaluation means comparing an activity or issue to the set objectives. It comprises the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of information about the activities. Evaluation strives to determine if the set objectives have been reached and the goals have been achieved, and if the necessary changes in the activities have been made. Evaluation also contains the element of valuation: based on the criteria and objectives set for the activity, the evaluator determines if the activities are good or bad (Vlasov et al., 2018). The pedagogical factors of ECE can be viewed as culturally and historically determined concepts, where practitioners' beliefs and practices have been found to influence emerging pedagogy (Alila et al., 2022). In the narrow concept, the pedagogical factors are often defined as a process of planning, implementing, and evaluating the teaching practices. This kind of simplified understanding of the process of education does not pay attention to the premises of education nor the societal values, restrictions, and paradigms. The wider context for pedagogy compounding through reciprocal interaction between practitioners' beliefs, structural context, and theoretical understanding (Kangas, 2016).

The pedagogical factors are created of the goal-oriented practices of pedagogical activities and guiding principles, which are mainly realized in interaction between individuals and contexts. Examples for evaluating the quality of pedagogical factors in Finnish ECEC are provided below in Table 2.2.

Operational practices arise from the operating culture; pedagogical operating practices arise from the **pedagogical operating culture**. The more aware, thoughtful,

Table 2.2 Examples for evaluating the quality of pedagogical factors in Finnish ECEC (Vlasov et al., 2018)

Quality area	Standards and Elements
1. Staff-child interaction	1.1. The staff interact reciprocally with the children in a manner compatible with the children's development, interests, and learning capabilities 1.2. The staff work sensitively, taking notice of the children's initiatives and responding to them in a manner that supports the children's participation and agency
2. Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation, and development	2.1. The staff are responsible for the planning, documentation, evaluation, and development of activities in line with the curriculum in a manner that supports the children's learning and development 2.2. The staff observe and document the children's daily lives in early childhood education and care regularly and systematically in order to understand the child's world of experience 2.3. Information produced together with the children and using diverse methods is used in the planning, implementation, evaluation, and development of the activities
3. Pedagogical activities and learning environments	3.1. ECEC activities are meaningful and inspiring for the children and challenge them to learn 3.2. The staff and the children carry out together versatile pedagogical activities based on play, physical activity, arts, and cultural heritage that offer positive learning experiences for the children. The activities promote the achievement of objectives set for different areas of learning and transversal competence 3.3. The pedagogical learning environment planned and built together by the staff and the children encourages the children to play, be physically active, explore, create, and express. The learning environment is assessed and modified regularly as indicated by the children's needs and interests, ensuring that it challenges and inspires the children to learn

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

Quality area	Standards and Elements
4. Leadership at the level of pedagogical activities	4.1. The head of the ECEC unit is responsible for the goal-oriented and methodical leadership, evaluation and development of their units' pedagogy, and the staff's opportunities for learning in their work 4.2. Pedagogical leadership is implemented with the support of ECEC teachers and ensuring the participation of the entire staff 4.3. The ECEC teacher is responsible for planning the activities for the child group, achieving the objectives set for the activities, and the evaluation and development
5. Peer interaction and group atmosphere	5.1. The staff and the children form a community of learners together in which every child's meaningful participation in the activities is realized. The staff support the children's group activities through their guidance and example 5.2. The staff build and guide the group's operating culture systematically, ensuring that it promotes, maintains, and develops togetherness
6. Interaction among staff and multidisciplinary cooperation	6.1. The staff work towards professional interaction based on trust, appreciation, and respect as part of the ECEC operating culture 6.2. The staff recognize their professional responsibilities and competence and those of the parties they work together with, and draw on them in multidisciplinary cooperation
7. Interaction between staff and guardians	7.1. Educational cooperation starts from appreciation for the children and their guardians as well as an open, equal, and trusting relationship. The interaction reflects respect for the guardians' knowledge of their children and for the staff's professional knowledge and competence

reasoned, and commonly agreed upon practices are, the more consistent the operational culture will be an important element of ECE. The continuous evaluation and development of pedagogical culture and practices are important (Alila et al., 2022). Pedagogical practices are dynamic and time- and context-dependent. Professionally grounded pedagogical policies and practices are based on the ECE policy, other policies, theory and knowledge base, values, and principles (see Johansson et al., 2018; The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) (see Fig. 2.1).

Operational practices arise from the operating culture; pedagogical operating practices arise from the **pedagogical operating culture**. The more aware, thoughtful, reasoned, and commonly agreed upon practices are, the more consistent the operational culture will be an important element of ECE. The continuous evaluation and development of pedagogical culture and practices are important (Alila et al., 2022).

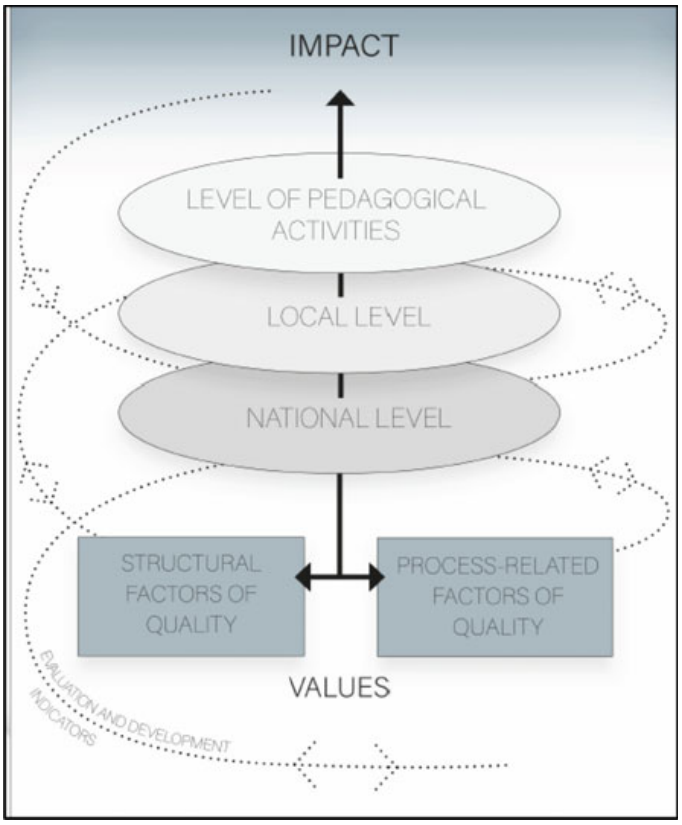

Fig. 2.1 Evaluation process of ECEC (Vlasov et al., 2018)

Pedagogical practices are dynamic and time- and context-dependent. Professionally grounded pedagogical policies and practices are based on the ECE policy, other policies, theory and knowledge base, values, and principles (see Johansson et al., 2018; The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) (see Fig. 1.1).

2.4.4 Documentation as a Core Activity of Assessment and Evaluation

Documentation is currently a key activity for quality early childhood education in Finland. The National Core Curriculum of Early Childhood Education and Care (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) states, that pedagogical documentation is an important approach when evaluating and developing pedagogical practices. Harcourt and Jones (2016) describe documentation of ECEC as a continuous and critical activity in ECEC. Documentation can be considered as description and documentation of any actual ECE pedagogical activities in details. Pedagogical activities can be documented for example using photos, videos, written documents, and children's drawings. Pedagogical documentation refers to the process of recording ethical perspectives, pedagogy, as well as constructing understanding of child's skills or the workings methods of the staff (Alasuutari, 2020; Alasuutari et al.,

2014). Through documentation and reflection, education becomes more and visible (Rintakorpi, 2016).

2.5 Key Findings

From the two countries, we can postulate three key findings around assessment and policy in early childhood education. These are listed below.

1. *Importance of qualified teachers*

   Theoretically, it is expected that poor quality early childhood education can be detrimental to the development of children potentially leading to poor social, emotional, educational, health, economic and behavioral outcomes. An important component of any learning experience is the quality of teaching, which is moderated to some degree by the skill of the teacher and their knowledge and experience. Prior to research undertaken by Manning et al. (2017, 2019), there was little consensus as to the strength of the relationship between teacher qualification (implying a certain level of skill and knowledge) and the quality of the early childhood learning environment. Such lack of evidence made it difficult for policy makers and educational practitioners alike to settle on strategies that would enhance the learning outcomes for children in their early stages of education.

   Manning et al. (2019) examined the empirical evidence on the correlation between teacher qualifications and the quality of early childhood learning environments. Overall, the results revealed that higher teacher qualifications are significantly correlated with higher quality early childhood education and care. The education level of the teachers or caregivers is positively correlated to overall ECEC qualities as measured by environment rating scales (ECERS/ECERS-R/ITERS/ITERS-R and any subscales). A positive correlation was also found between teacher qualification and subscale ratings including program structure, language, and reasoning. This finding is not dependent on culture and context given that the evidence is from several countries.

   What can be learnt from these experiments is that mandating qualified teachers (i.e., with tertiary education), may lead to significant improvement for both process and structural quality within center-based and home-based ECEC settings. However, it should be noted that the evidence employed in the meta-analysis by Manning and colleagues is from correlational studies. As such, more robust independent studies need to be undertaken to assess causal effects. In addition, future research in this area should also assess what specific knowledge and skills learnt by teachers with higher qualifications enable them to complete their roles effectively.

   The evaluation of ECEC is based on the knowledge of ECEC teachers, research, and theoretical perspectives in ECEC. The high-qualified teachers are in responsibility how ECEC pedagogy is implemented in practice (Saracho &

Spodek, 2003). ECEC teachers together with other professionals, guardians, and children together provide an essential evaluation of pedagogical practices. Teacher education in Australia (see ACECQA and AITSL standards) and Finland are generally high quality (Fonsen & Vlasov, 2017). In meeting the increasing challenges of ECEC field the professional development has become central to the ECEC teachers (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018). The evaluation of ECEC is a significant part of the pedagogical process (Alila et al., 2022) and the ECEC teachers need more information about the planning and implementation of evaluation and assessment of ECEC. The most important aspect is to understand the meaning of evaluation.

2. *Assessment structures*

   Evaluating the effectiveness of pedagogical activity in advance, during and after the activity is crucial. In Finland, the evaluation of the ECEC pedagogy is implemented on the basis of values, aims, and science and research in early childhood education (Alila & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018). In Finnish ECEC, the assessment and evaluation are directed toward the pedagogical practices, operational culture, and processes of education, never toward set lists, comparing children's skills and competencies, or grading. The holistic structures of early education in Finland are following the Nordic approaches of curriculum, where children's learning, wellbeing, and social agency are the key elements (see Bennet, 2005). Thus these pedagogical dimensions of quality are assessed through multitude approach and discourses: There are innumerable methods of pedagogical evaluation with the focus on the teaching, pedagogical interaction, educational activities, and learning environment.

   We suggest that to understand the structures of assessment and evaluation the differing cultural and pedagogical standpoints, could be understood not only as different approaches to pedagogy in ECEC but different attitudes to the child in the process of enculturation (Kangas et al., 2020). This book creates a dynamic interaction between these different viewpoints in aim to offer new approaches for the shared development of assessment and evaluation structures within the ECEC.

3. *Importance of documentation*

   Both countries engage with documentation of pedagogical process to make both children's learning and pedagogical quality visible. Pedagogical documentation enables the recording of ethical perspectives, values, pedagogy (Alila et al., 2022). Through documentation, education becomes more open which allows the critical considerations and ongoing development of the quality (Rintakorpi, 2016).

   In Finland, the focus of documentation is to bring children's perspectives visible for personnel and parents, but also serve as systematic follow up of development of working methods and practices. More generally pedagogical documentation can contribute to an equal opportunity for participating in equal decision-making in ECEC (Paananen & Lipponen, 2018). With help, the documentation is possible to understand children's perspectives and support facilitate children's opinions to become part of their daily lives at ECEC.

In Australia, the focus is on documenting children's learning in relation to the learning outcomes. Teachers can choose what and how they document, based on the individual needs of the community and center. Similar to Finland, it serves as systematic way to document key outcomes for children. As such, it is important that teachers have a strong understanding around documentation.

2.6 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has provided a comparison of Australia and Finland around assessment and evaluation processes within early childhood education and care. Differences emerge as well as similarities around structural quality. A key difference is the amount of surveillance between both countries in regard to implementing requirements and legislation. A major similarity is the importance of qualified early childhood teachers to support children's learning and development. Both countries recognize the importance of early childhood teachers to support structural and process quality improvement. We advocate for the importance of early childhood teachers to become known across the international context, especially in regard to the implementation of assessment and evaluation policies to enhance quality. Without qualified staff, quality outcomes cannot be achieved.

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