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An introduction to assessment and evaluation in ECEC context

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The intention of this book was to draw together key research across the globe around assessment and evaluation within early childhood education and care contexts (ECEC). We hope that by bringing together a diverse range of perspectives, we can open an important space for dialogue around supporting and developing the field of early childhood education and care to support children's learning and development. The assessment in education have been widely defined and described in the sectors of primary and secondary education. How ever in the field of ECEC the theoretical contextualization is vague and get multitude definitions and understandings among the researchers.

To contextualize assessment and evaluation practices and policies in the field of ECEC we need to understand the educational context they are linked to: The curricula and the quality. Educational context is based on curricular documents, which are always political documents that seek to unify and justify the educational practices in the field (Kangas & al. 2019). Joseph (2011) introduces curriculum as a compendium of cultures including both the future visions and the existing practices about learning, image of learners, the nature of instructions, norms, environments of learning, teachers, and teaching as a job, together with planning and evaluation of both the learning and the curriculum itself. In different countries and educational system, curricula with different types of contents are used. For example, the Anglo-American preschool tradition where the aim of education is to make children ready for school, differs from the Nordic Countries, Australian and Central European system based on the socio-cultural and pedagogic tradition focusing more on children's social development with an emphasis on children's participation and play through more holistic curriculum goals (Kangas & al. 2019; Bennet 2005). The curriculum orientation influences also to the assessment approaches of the ECEC: The first tradition is based on set results and systematic testing of children using pre-set exam, while latter approach defines the developmental aims more broadly, enabling the teachers to plan the ECEC programme to local setting and to base assessment on more varied objectives (Bennet 2005). During the current decade the debate of the need of formal and systematic evaluation in the context of ECEC have been raised also in this socio-cultural learning approach tradition. The formative and systematic assessment is

claimed to provide information of the individual development and personal needs of special support, and it has been used to enable children's right to education (Correia et al. 2019). In this book we elaborate the ongoing political and scientifical discussion about the formative evaluation and assessment in ECEC. In Finland the discussion culminated in the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's recently published guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care in Finland (Vlasov et al. 2019).

Simultaneously, during the last decade we have seen a large increase in studies indicating the importance of early years. This has led to a discussion on how to enhance the quality of early learning practices and environment, including the focus on the assessment and evaluation processes. The quality discourse could be understood as the context of education and it has been used for a search of standards, objectives, and developmental goals of ECEC from the perspectives of how to increase a universal quality of education rather than why should it be increased (Dahlberg et al. 1999). It is even claimed that only high-quality education is effective education (Chepkonga 2017), and scholars and nations have defined the quality of education from different perspectives. According to McLachlan & al. (2018) quality of ECEC is based both the individual definitions of practitioners and stakeholders – like the children and parents – but also an act of judgement by other stakeholders of education who are screening the processes and products of early education. In multinational organizations this discussion turned into practical action. In 2016 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) invited bids to develop and pilot what has been referred to as 'baby PISA.' The study was called 'International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study' (or IELS). While PISA aims at 15-year-olds on various assessment domains that among other information rank countries by performance, a similar concept was proposed for early childhood education with five-year-old children that looked at a variety of inputs related to child development and learning (Garvis, Harju-Luukkainen & Yngvesson 2019). Already more than a decade ago, Bodrova (2008) raised concerns about the European ECEC systems focusing more and more on academic skills and set goals, and less on pretend play and socio-cultural learning. In socio-cultural approach education quality is not only something that could be assessed through formative tests scores, but a holistic context that concerns the whole child, education, and society (Kangas & al. 2019). However, in literature, there is little consensus on how to define high quality and further, how to develop it. Quality is a complex concept with many interdependent variables, which all are influencing the ECEC environment (European Commission 2014). Furthermore, the evaluation methods are numerous. Various

analyses of these guidelines show that the Nordic countries are struggling with uniting the concepts of care, upbringing, and education, also known as educare (Lager 2019). It is important to focus on the transformation and enactment of national objectives through a more critical and reflective method and a more democratic view of educational evaluation both in national and in the global levels (Vallberg-Roth, 2014). The viewpoint of developing quality of ECEC through standardized measurements and testing and on the other hand the paradigm of meaningful, holistic, and sustainable ECEC represent the opposite ends of the discourse. Between those emerges a wide area with different approaches, beliefs and values about the meaning and the focus of assessment and evaluation in the context of early education as well as the concepts of content, control, and coherence within the ECEC in general (Brownlee 2009; Wood & Hedges 2016).

Ten years ago Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, 35) stated that: 'It has been argued for many years that the most satisfactory account of the curriculum is given by a modernist, positivist reading of the development of education and society.' After that the global questions of the quality of education, inclusion, equality, sustainability, and responsibility among all have been raised as part of global discussion in the field of education (Ainscow 2020; 2016; Bourn 2020). Despite of ongoing global changes the question of framing and understanding the evaluation ideal behind educational documents remains unanswered. Using curricular expression Cohen et al. (2011) refer to Tyler's (1949) influential rationale for the curriculum, including four questions:

(1) What educational purposes should the school [here the ECEC] seek to attain?
(2) What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
(3) How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
(4) How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2017.)

These questions are also essential when the aspects of assessment and evaluation, as well as the rationale, power issues, and justifications are discussed. The concepts of education are not based on any natural standards or empirical facts of the world and that is why both curricula and quality of education should be contextualized through temporal, complex, and diverse dialogue (Dahlberg et al. 1999). It is important to ask fundamental questions about the nature, elements, aim, and finally the practices of curriculum (Dillon 2009). For example, the nature of curriculum can be political and directive, but it also can be scientific and guiding. The

practices of curriculum also vary depending on the levels of control, coherence, and content (Wood & Hedges 2016). While in the cases and schools where the curriculum lists specific learning areas, their outcomes and goals, the curriculum serves as evaluation guide for teachers who implement the education. Then in the other hand in countries where curriculum is more like a guideline for pedagogical quality, teachers' pedagogical interaction and scaffolding processes, curriculum serves as book of values, in which teachers and school managers can rely on when they are making decisions of the assessment and evaluation. The curricula are political documents that are combined strongly with ongoing cultural values and debate of the future citizenship skills. In many nations this political control is recently developed so that ECE must justify economic investment by proving its effectiveness, particularly in securing 'school readiness' (Wood & Hedges 2016). For school readiness evaluation a different sets of assessment methods and tools are needed than for the more traditional laissez-faire approach-based curriculum. For example, Bodrova (2008) have warned against the development towards control discourses and schoolification. According to Moss and Urban (2020), international comparative evaluation has a danger of a 'mode of governance', which entails a belief in global solutions imposed by data and evidence on what works based on the false idea of a consensus on the aims of education and the paths to achieving them. The evaluation has also an element of exposing diversity and complexity including meanings, purposes, values, and ethics. More generally education is understood as a shaping or molding process of children's identities and competences they need to shape a better future society (McLachlan et al. 2018). According to Moss and Urban (2020), for early childhood education to make a meaningful contribution to sustainability and social and ecological justice, we will have to shift our focus from assessing narrow and predetermined 'early learning outcomes' to pedagogies of uncertainty and exploration.

To understand the focus and key elements of the assessment and evaluation in the context of ECEC from the key context the curricula and the quality, three viewpoints can be made to clarify the framework of the process. The viewpoints here are:

- Who are the key players in the assessment and evaluation process?
- Why are assessment and evaluation made?
- What is the control and context of assessment within the focus of evaluation?

WHO

Role of the policymakers

Early childhood education systems are globally organized as publicly funded or independent services for young children, their families, and more generally for society. Education is a right of children based on the Convention of the Rights of a Child (UN 1989). In many countries, early childhood education has become a political leaver, used to try, and improve school readiness and children's learning and development outcomes. This has meant a significant focus on continuous improvement in education to support sustained change over time. In some countries, this is achieved through regular evaluations of early childhood services to create a standard for quality. In other countries, standards may be achieved by policymakers giving control to early childhood services to govern their own quality and improvement. Policymakers have ambitions to influence education, since education can be considered as the future of their nation and society. However not all decisions are made keeping the child's best in mind. The teachers and parents need support to participate in early childhood education discussions as well as decision-making actively but they also need competence in understanding the political message and its goals. For instance, Reid et al. (2019) has stated that the political discussion of "normal" childhood and children is strongly biased

Role of teachers

Teachers (also known as educators in some countries) are also considered as key players in the assessment and evaluation process as they are in control of process quality in early childhood services. Teachers not only create and influence early childhood services directly, but they might also be evaluated and assessed themselves by others. This means teachers are both influences of the process as well as recipients of being assessed and analyzed. Further, the role of teachers in the assessment and evaluation process is central. The teacher is often the person who has the justification, knowledge, and skills to conduct the assessment in practice. However, the teachers' awareness of their personal values and beliefs can influence how they implement the curriculum or conduct the assessment processes in class (Brownlee 2009). As an example, in the Finnish system teachers plan the assessment processes and choose the assessment tools for self-evaluation of the pedagogy and practices in the classroom (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén 2019). Therefore, teachers need a better understanding of the assessment and evaluation goals as well as knowledge of the values of the curriculum, but above all teachers need training and education that facilitates their high-quality professional knowledge and agency and resources to be able to implement the assessment with high ethical and pedagogical standards (see Kangas & Harju-Luukkainen, 2021).

Role of parents

In especially developing countries, but also in UEA, Australia, and Great Britain, a so-called education shopping, where parents follow the ratings of ECEC center and choose among the bests for their children is an increasing phenomenon (see. Aitchison 2010). This school shopping increased inequality especially when the rankings are based on children's output and scores – no school will accept students with a low socio-economical background of learning difficulties as their students when they are afraid of the next ranking (Stahl et al 2018). In these scenarios the role of assessment and evaluation is to rank schools for consumers to choose from. In highly competitive markets where ECEC is a private good, price points are also important around assessment and evaluation. As such, price points also create questions around access inequality and the nature of private markets for ECEC. Some countries may have ECEC as a state good, meaning there is a low or free price point, with a focus on access for all children. However, parents may still be concerned about the quality provision in these countries.

Further, parents from different cultures and school experiences value different types of ECEC. For example, academic training and self-control of young children may be demanded by parents from some Asian cultures (Luo et al. 2013). In some European countries parents don't wish their children to start learning too early, because it is believed to prevent them from playing and wellbeing of childhood (Salmi 2006). Parents prefer that children learn ABCs and numbers as soon as possible in some Latino cultures where education is costly and play should be separated for break times (Tobin et al., 2013). All these different expectations of parents together with the choice of private ECEC or even "school-shopping" could influence the chosen assessment and evaluation tools and system and the implementation of the ECEC (Reid & al. 2019).

Role of children

While children are the direct recipient of ECEC, they may be forgotten in assessment and evaluations. This implies that assessments and evaluations are done on the learning environment in which the children exist (mainly through observation), however children may not be directly related to the process. Children however may have important things to say (child perspective) that can differ from the adult perspective. Capturing children's experiences is understood to be an active process of communication involving listening, interpreting, and

co-constructing meanings (Lipponen et al. 2018). Problems may arise however around the consent and legality of children being involved in the formal assessment and evaluation processes. Thus, children must be given the opportunity to express their perspectives and voice, and they should be facilitated to express themselves. Children's participation in the assessment and evaluation processes should be part of their everyday lessons and interaction between teachers and children (Kangas & Lastikka 2018). For facilitating children's participation and supporting their understanding of the process of evaluation it should be as well planned as any pedagogical activity or teacher-led learning is (Venninen & Leinonen 2012). With the traditional methods such as observation, interview, questionnaires, also new methods such as using cameras and audio tools, action telling, mind maps, and arts-based activities need to be developed (Kangas & Lastikka 2019; Clark 2005).

WHY

For systematic overviews of education

International assessments, such as PISA and TIMSS contribute by giving national and international level comparable indicators. These results make it possible for policymakers, researchers, and educators on different levels to identify the weaknesses and strengths of the system in question. However, it is important to note, that several education issues become more salient when education systems are held in comparison (Ikeada & Echazarra 2020). According to Ikeda and Echazarra (2020) an example of this is grade repetition. On the one hand systems encourage students to repeat and on the other students advance automatically. There are also other challenges that are of importance to understand when interpreting the results. These are connected to economic, social, and technological challenges, relevance, the usefulness of the results, reliability, transparency, and drawing causal interferences (Ikeada and Echazarra 2020). Further, according to Dohn (2007) for instance PISA assessments fail to constitute an operationalization of the question of inquiry that could be properly implemented through the selected methodology. Also, the so-called Baby PISA, OECD's International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study, which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by the quality of early learning programs, have received a similar critique. For instance, Pence (2016) and Urban (2017) have claimed that it won't provide wanted a systematic overview of early childhood education within the different cultural contexts. The systematic overviews of education practices and processes are important for the development

of the quality of services, but it can be done in multiple ways (see for instance Garvis, Harju-Luukkainen & Yngvesson 2019).

For high-quality ECEC services

Improving the quality and effectiveness of investment in education is one of the key objectives of the European Strategic Framework for education and Training 2020 (2016). Education assessment and evaluation are part of this quality assurance system. Some countries are moving towards more equitable education policies and practices and in these contexts, some form of monitoring of the education system or its parts is expected. However, it is important to note, that there are multiple challenges with these. For instance, Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2020) highlight, that countries have individual ethnic and socioeconomic profiles with multiple and unique mechanisms affecting educational outcomes and children's positive learning trajectories, making national and international comparisons challenging (see also Harju-Luukkainen et al. 2021). Therefore, if countries want high-quality ECEC services, they need to have a working and continued assessment and evaluation around quality, taking these unique perquisites of a country or region into consideration. Through regular monitoring of ECEC services, universal standards can be created that promote shared understandings of support children's learning and development. By regular evaluations, governments can also decide where resources should be allocated to support the quality of development of ECEC services. Assessment and evaluations also allow us to support positive children's learning and development through measuring and comparing learning, especially within developmental frameworks. Measurements allow us to plan for groups, as well as individual children. At a policy level, understanding attained levels of learning also can lead to decisions around a support structure and resource allocation.

WHAT

The final question we draw upon is around the 'what' are we evaluating and assessing. Again across multiple landscapes this depends on cultural and contextual considerations. The key is that there is a shared understanding of the 'what' to allow policies, teachers, and families to come together to share and advocate for children and children's lives. When all stakeholders agree, a successful policy can support long-term child development and wellbeing.

Children

Children's skills and learning can be part of assessment or evaluation in several different ways. While observation is the preferred method in many countries, others may favor individual assessment practices, especially when evaluating school readiness of the overall effectiveness of a learning program regarding child response. In some countries, the idea of measuring children's learning is considered taboo, while in others it is an accepted practice in relation to early intervention and to prepare children for formal schooling. Again culture and context play an important role in how to involve children in the assessment and evaluation process (Kangas et al. 2019). An important question is why the children's performance is evaluated. If the goal of evaluation is to rank schools or children based on their answers to set questions the ethical orientation of the evaluation remains vague. According to Moss and Urban (2020) assessing narrow and predetermined 'early learning outcomes' leads to low-quality pedagogies of uncertainty where teachers forgot that they are teaching the child, not the subject. However if children are experiencing participation through the evaluation process, they are supported to understand the goals and justifications of the assessment, and their feedback and critical voices are respected in the process, assessment and evaluation could form a meaningful part of the education together with planning and implementation of the classroom activities and environments (Kangas & Lastikka 2019; Lipponen et al. 2018). Assessment can support the development of self-regulation and self-efficacy competencies, and facilitate the meta-cognitive development, and perspectives of children as active learners and agents of education.

Teachers

Teachers can be involved in multiple ways with assessment and evaluation. This includes reporting data about children in their class and learning trajectories, as well as being observed in their own practices. Teachers may also be asked to demonstrate certain capabilities to achieve certain levels. For example, some countries have formalized teacher registration of early childhood teachers that would require an assessment or evaluation of the skills they have learned. Yet, there are limited measurements around individual teacher quality for early childhood education. This is, to some extent, because of honoring the unique features of early childhood contexts and the range of skills that early childhood teachers implement (see Kangas et Harju-Luukkainen 2021). In some countries however, there has been a movement towards greater standardization around teacher practice, especially in the formal years of schooling. This has also meant the creation of Teaching Performance Assessments (such as the United States and Australia) in the final year of teacher education to provide an overall

assessment of a teacher before they enter the profession (see Corcoran et Flaherty 2018). Yet, teaching performance assessments in early childhood education are not as common as the formal years of schooling, however if a government is focused on standardizing teacher skills, it may be a future endeavor in some countries. On the other hand teachers are criticizing the evaluation systems that force them to compete against their colleagues. As Urban (2017) has warned, with standardized tests there is the risk of misusing them as a tool of comparison schools and teachers and thus create biases and controversial issues between the professionals. Teaching is a professional skill needing constant development and learning taking place through reflection and pedagogical development (see Kangas et al. 2016) and it should not be seen as a feature or *status quo* of teachers.

Policies

Policies are based on developing and improving quality within early childhood education. The overall goal is to support children and their families within early childhood settings. In some countries, quality may be formally evaluated using policies that allow regular external reviews and requirements of early childhood services and early childhood teachers. Likewise, policies might also drive pedagogical practice such as quality improvement work through ongoing assessment and evaluation within individual work practices in early childhood services. In this way, the policy is used as a lever to standardize experience and practice across the early childhood sector. In this book, we see many examples of how policy is used as a lever for early childhood education quality improvement.

Conclusion

Across the chapters in this book, we bring together a diverse range of expertise around assessment and evaluations in ECEC. The conceptual discourse of both the curriculum development and quality management in ECEC are represented and contextualized within the following chapters of this book. The intention of the book is to explore similarities and differences across different contexts and cultures. This allows us to explore the contexts of Australia, Finland, Russia, China, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, and the United States. A variety of areas emerge including policy, measuring cognitive skills, international data sets, feedback, evaluation techniques as well as highlighting benefits and challenges. This brings opportunities to enhance the quality discourse beyond complexity, diversity, individuality,

subjectivity, multiple perspectives, and other diverse elements of the post-modern world (see Dahlberg et al. 1999).

As the curriculum of early childhood education in general is described by McLachlan & al. (2018) to be the environment of learning and development for young children, could the assessment and evaluation sustainable development of that environment. In the hands of motivated and qualified practitioners and stakeholders the methods and practices of the evaluation could thrive, sustain, and secure the better future. We hope that as readers, you can draw upon the important questions asked above and reflect on current provisions of assessment and evaluation within the ECEC landscape. We advocate for a supported approach within ECEC research that allows all children and teachers to be supported with positive learning and development.

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