FINNISH EDUCATION
EVALUATION CENTRE

GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

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Abstract

The document 'Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care' was produced as part of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre FINEEC's task of developing the evaluation of ECEC. It lays the foundation for the evaluation of the structure and content of ECEC both at the national and the local level. The purpose of this document is to support ECEC organisers and private service providers in carrying out systematic and goal-oriented self-evaluation associated with quality management and to provide tools for evaluating the structure and content of early childhood education and care. The document contains a review of research on the constituting elements of quality in early childhood education and care and presents *indicators* for the quality of early childhood education and care in Finland created on the basis of this research.

The Introduction to the document discusses the general principles of evaluating early childhood education and care and defines the responsibilities for evaluation at different levels. Chapter 2 explains in concrete terms what systematic evaluation means in the specific context of early childhood education and care and describes the principles of enhancement-led evaluation. Chapter 3 presents a model for the evaluation and development of quality created through an expert body's work process and provides a review of research on what quality in early childhood education consists of in the Finnish context. In this model, quality is seen as being composed of structural and process-related factors, which should be realised at the national, local and pedagogical activity level in order to deliver early childhood education and care with impact. The structural factors of quality are factors related to the organisation of early childhood education and care. As they are defined and governed by acts, decrees and other national documents, they are relatively permanent. Process-related factors refer to 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 process-related factors of quality describe how the objectives set and the content determined for early childhood education and care are implemented in practice.

To conclude, the document presents quality indicators for early childhood education and care based on a division into structural and process-related factors of quality. The national quality indicators prepared for early childhood education and care create a framework of aspects on which evaluation should be focused to ensure high quality in early childhood education and care. Rather than constituting an assessment tool in themselves, the indicators serve as an evidence-based foundation for elements of quality at the national, local and pedagogical activity level. Early childhood education and care organisers and private service providers should use these indicators to draw up more detailed criteria through which their activities can be evaluated. At a later stage, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre will provide tools for operationalising the indicators into a form that can be used in evaluations.

Tiivistelmä

Varhaiskasvatuksen laadun arvioinnin perusteet ja suositukset -asiakirja on osa Kansallisen koulutuksen arviointikeskuksen (Karvin) varhaiskasvatuksen arvioinnin kehittämistehtävää. Asiakirja luo perustan varhaiskasvatuksen rakenteen ja sisällön arvioimiseksi sekä kansallisella että paikallisella tasolla. Asiakirjan tarkoituksena on tukea varhaiskasvatuksen järjestäjiä ja yksityisiä palveluntuottajia laadunhallintaan liittyvän itsearvioinnin toteuttamisessa suunnitelmallisesti ja tavoitteellisesti sekä tarjota välineitä varhaiskasvatuksen rakenteelliselle ja sisällölliselle arvioinnille. Asiakirja sisältää tutkimuskoonnin siitä, mistä varhaiskasvatuksen laatu muodostuu sekä tutkimuksesta johdetut suomalaisen varhaiskasvatuksen laadun *indikaattorit*.

Asiakirjan johdannossa esitellään varhaiskasvatuksen arviointia linjaavia yleisiä periaatteita ja määritellään arviointivastuut eri tasoilla. Toisessa luvussa konkretisoidaan sitä, mitä systemaattisella arvioinnilla tarkoitetaan erityisesti varhaiskasvatuksessa, sekä avataan kehittävän arvioinnin periaatteet. Kolmannessa luvussa esitellään asiantuntijaryhmän työprosessissa muodostettu laadun arvioinnin ja kehittämisen malli ja esitellään tutkimuskoonnit siitä, mistä varhaiskasvatuksen laatu suomalaisessa kontekstissa koostuu. Mallissa laatu nähdään rakentuvan rakenteellisista ja prosesseihin liittyvistä tekijöistä, joiden tulee todentua kansallisella, paikallisella ja pedagogisen toiminnan tasoilla, tuottaakseen vaikuttavaa varhaiskasvatusta. Laadun rakennetekijät ovat varhaiskasvatuksen järjestämiseen liittyviä tekijöitä, joita määrittävät ja säätelevät esimerkiksi lait, asetukset ja muut valtakunnalliset asiakirjat, ja ne ovat sen vuoksi suhteellisen pysyviä. Prosessitekijöillä tarkoitetaan varhaispedagogiikan ydintoimintoja ja yksikön pedagogista toimintakulttuuria, joilla on suora yhteys lapsen kokemuksiin. Laadun prosessitekijät kuvaavat, miten varhaiskasvatukselle asetettuja tavoitteita ja sisältöjä käytännössä toteutetaan.

Lopuksi esitellään varhaiskasvatuksen laadun indikaattorit, jotka on jaettu laadun rakennetekijöihin ja prosessitekijöihin. Varhaiskasvatukseen laaditut kansalliset laadun indikaattorit luovat pohjan sille, mihin asioihin arviointi tulisi kohdistaa, jotta varhaiskasvatuksen laatu olisi

korkeatasoista. Indikaattorit eivät vielä ole arviointiväline, vaan ne antavat tutkimusperustaisen pohjan sille, mistä laatu muodostuu niin kansallisella, paikallisella kuin pedagogisen toiminnan tasoilla. Varhaiskasvatuksen järjestäjien ja yksityisten palveluntuottajien tulee laatia indikaattorien pohjalta yksityiskohtaisempia kriteerejä, joiden avulla toimintaa on mahdollista arvioida. Myöhemmässä vaiheessa Karvi tulee tarjoamaan välineitä indikaattorien operationalisoimiseksi arvioitavaan muotoon.

Sammandrag

Dokumentet Grunder och rekommendationer för utvärderingen av småbarnspedagogikens kvalitet hör till det uppdrag som Nationella centret för utbildningsutvärdering (NCU) har i fråga om att utveckla utvärderingen av småbarnspedagogiken. Dokumentet skapar en grund för utvärdering av strukturer och innehåll på både nationell och lokal nivå. Syftet med dokumentet är att på ett systematiskt och målinriktat sätt ge anordnarna av småbarnspedagogik och tjänsteproducenterna stöd i självvärdering och kvalitetsledning och att ge dem verktyg för en strukturell och innehållsmässig utvärdering av småbarnspedagogiken. Dokumentet innehåller en sammanställning av forskningen kring vad småbarnspedagogikens kvalitet består av samt forskningsbaserade *indikatorer* som beskriver den finländska småbarnspedagogikens kvalitet.

I dokumentets inledning ges en presentation av de allmänna principer som styr utvärderingen av småbarnspedagogiken och en redogörelse för utvärderingsansvaret på olika nivåer. I det andra kapitlet beskrivs på ett konkret sätt vad systematisk utvärdering innebär, särskilt inom småbarnspedagogiken, och principerna i fråga om utvecklande utvärdering förklaras. Det tredje kapitlet presenterar en modell för utvärdering och utveckling av kvaliteten och ger en sammanställning av forskningen kring vad småbarnspedagogikens kvalitet består av i den finländska kontexten. I modellen, som tagits fram i en expertgrupps arbetsprocess, är kvalitet uppbyggd av strukturella faktorer och processfaktorer, och dessa faktorer ska förverkligas på alla verksamhetsnivåer för att småbarnspedagogiken ska vara verkningsfull. De strukturella faktorerna anknyter till anordnandet av småbarnspedagogiken och definieras och regleras till exempel av lagar, förordningar och andra nationella dokument, vilket betyder att de är relativt permanenta. Med processfaktorer avses småbarnspedagogikens kärnaktiviteter och enheternas pedagogiska verksamhetskultur – faktorer som är direkt kopplade till barnens erfarenheter. Med kvalitetens processfaktorer beskrivs hur man arbetar för att nå målen för småbarnspedagogiken och hur man genomför innehållen i praktiken.

I slutet av dokumentet presenteras småbarnspedagogikens kvalitetsindikatorer, som är uppdelade i strukturfaktorer och processfaktorer. De nationella kvalitetsindikatorerna för småbarnspedagogiken skapar en grund för beslut om vilka frågor utvärderingen ska fokusera på för att småbarnspedagogikens kvalitet ska vara högklassig. Indikatorerna är inte ett utvärderingsverktyg utan ger en forskningsbaserad grund för det som kvaliteten bygger på, såväl på nationell och lokal som på pedagogisk nivå. Anordnarna av småbarnspedagogik och de privata tjänsteproducenterna ska utifrån indikatorerna ta fram mer detaljerade kriterier med vilka de kan utvärdera verksamheten. I ett senare skede kommer NCU att tillhandahålla verktyg med vilka indikatorerna kan operationaliseras så att de blir användbara vid utvärdering.

Contents

Key concepts relevant to the evaluation of early childhood education and care quality

This section elucidates some concepts relevant to the evaluation of early childhood education and care used in this document. In other contexts, the same concepts may be used differently and in slightly different meanings, depending on the perspective, methodology or field of science. Evaluation alone can be defined in a wide variety of ways, and each school of evaluation has its own definition. In this document, however, the concepts are used in the following meanings:

Structural factors of quality are factors related to the organisation of early childhood education as defined in and governed by acts, decrees and other national documents. For this reason, factors of quality related to structures are relatively permanent. They are linked to such aspects as *who* is responsible for ECEC activities, *where* ECEC activities take place, and *what* type of a setting is created for the activities. Consequently, they set marginal conditions for pedagogical activities, or process-related factors of quality.

Process-related 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 process-related factors of quality describe *how* the objectives and content specified for early childhood education and care are realised in practice. The structural and process-related 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.

Self-evaluation is a form of evaluation that primarily produces information about the activities, operating culture and prevailing values for the internal use of an ECEC organisation. Self-evaluation helps ECEC organisers and private service providers identify development areas and existing strengths that can be used to support systematic development. The evaluation data produced by an organisation should describe its activities as truthfully and concretely as possible.

Enhancement-led evaluation is the guiding operating principle of early childhood education and care at the national and local level as well as at the level of pedagogical activities. It stresses the fact that evaluation is carried out to develop the organisation's own activities, not for the benefit of an external evaluator or some other actor. Characteristically, enhancement-led evaluation is based on trust between the actors. Orientation towards the future plays a key role in the evaluation process which, rather than relying on a backward-looking evaluation that states the facts, is associated with the possibility of learning. In this document, enhancement-led evaluation is illustrated through four key principles: participation, a multi-method approach, adaptability and transparency.

Quality management comprises the leadership, planning and evaluation of early childhood education and care as well as continuous improvement of the activities in order to achieve the quality objectives. Quality management refers to strategic actions taken by an organiser to guide its organisation's quality work. Quality management includes the planning and direction of quality, quality assurance and quality improvement. Among other things, a quality management system helps to ensure that evaluation data collected on child groups reaches the entire organisation, up to the highest levels of management and decision-makers. This systematically collected data allows the organisation to improve its activities further.

An indicator is a concrete and verifiable description of the essential and desirable properties of high-quality early childhood education and care. An indicator is a target level and thus the basis for measurement, which helps to summarise complex information into a form that can be more easily managed and understood. ECEC quality indicators lay the foundation for consistent national-level practices and principles, following which early childhood education and care can be evaluated and, consequently, developed.

In this document, **criteria** refer to grounds for evaluation. They are attributes that define indicators in greater detail, or properties that differentiate indicators. A quality criterion is an attribute selected as the basis for defining quality. Criteria are clear claims or questions that describe the practice. The activities to be evaluated are compared to the criteria, and on this basis, conclusions can be made on to what extent the criteria are met; in other words, at what level the activities are currently carried out. Through criteria, the implementation of the indicators in daily work can be evaluated in concrete terms, either qualitatively or quantitatively.

1
Introduction

The Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care is a document intended for ECEC organisers and private service providers to support self-evaluation and quality management related to early childhood education and care. Self-evaluation carried out by ECEC organisers and private service providers is part of the national system of ECEC evaluation and development aiming to improve the quality of early childhood education and care, support continuous improvement and development of the activities, and promote the fulfilment of the tasks and achievement of the objectives set for early childhood education and care. Self-evaluation helps ECEC organisers and private service providers identify development areas and existing strengths that can be used to support systematic development. This document may also be used as a quality management tool for the purposes of strategic leadership.

The document 'Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care' is part of the national ECEC steering system and supports it as a whole. The document lays the foundation for evaluating the structure and content of ECEC both at the national and the local level. Its purpose is to clarify the role of ECEC evaluation as part of organisers' and private service providers' quality management and thus promote the achievement of equitable preconditions for the holistic growth, development and learning of the children participating in early childhood education and care[1]. Through diverse evaluation, an effort is also made to produce up-to-date information to underpin national and local development and decision-making related to early childhood education and care.

Under the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, the municipalities are responsible for the organisation of early childhood education and care in their areas, ensuring that the service meets the statutory requirements and the residents' ECEC needs. The national steering system offers the municipalities broad autonomy and also responsibility for providing access to high-quality services for all residents. For instance, the municipalities can make decisions on whether the activities are to be organised as municipal and/or private services and what operating forms the

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1   Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 3; National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016

services contain. They can also decide whether or not children's right to full-time early childhood education and care is restricted. Similarly, the municipalities can to some extent make decisions on the child-staff ratios in child groups at day-care centres. The organiser's task is to plan and carry out self-evaluation as part of a more extensive system of quality management in all forms of early childhood education and care.

In this document, an organiser refers to a municipality or a joint municipal authority. A private service provider refers to other service providers besides a municipality or a joint municipal authority, regardless of whether the private party operates as the provider or organiser of the services, or whether the services are outsourced, the activities of a private service provider are funded by service vouchers, or private care subsidies are used as the funding form. A guardian refers to a child's parent or other guardian.

This document is based on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care that entered into force on 1 September 2018[2]. While the document creates capabilities for evaluating early childhood education and care provided at day-care centres, in particular, the evaluation guidelines and quality indicators presented in it may, where applicable, also be used to evaluate pre-primary education, family day care and open early childhood education and care.

The different forms of early childhood education and care in Finland set a challenge to the evaluation of quality. Excepting pre-primary education, the different operating forms are guided by the objectives specified in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, and the same mandatory curriculum is applicable to all of them. However, such aspects as the qualification requirements related to staff training or learning environments are different at a day-care centre and in family day-care. The problem lies in achieving the objectives of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care equally in dissimilar operating forms. While there is an awareness of these problems arising from the different operating forms, solving them has so far proven impossible. As the responsibility for organising and evaluating early childhood education and care rests with the organisers, the manner in which evaluation is carried out in different operating forms should be decided at the local level. The document 'Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education' will support the organisers, whatever the operating form.

1.1 National development of ECEC quality evaluation

The guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education are drawn up by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). FINEEC's task related to developing ECEC evaluation stems from a proposal[3] issued by the Department for Early Childhood Education, Comprehensive School Education and Liberal Adult Education at the Ministry of Education and Culture, in which FINEEC was tasked to prepare a long-term ECEC evaluation plan

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2   Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018
3   a proposal issued on 27 November 2015

and to develop the evaluation of early childhood education and care in Finland. FINEEC's tasks and organisation are laid down in acts[4] and a decree[5]. For a more detailed definition of FINEEC's task related to ECEC evaluation, see section 1.4 of this document.

Key requirements regarding the quality of Finnish early childhood education and care arise from legislation on early childhood education and care, the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, and international expert knowledge and research evidence. While these political, legislative and evidence-based sources of information directing ECEC development are different, they complement each other. Drawing on these sources, the expert body that prepared this document structured a model describing the quality factors of Finnish early childhood education and care (Chapter 3). To support the preparation of the model for the evaluation and development of quality, the expert body utilised research and international recommendations on ECEC quality. During its mandate, the expert body familiarised itself with different quality evaluation models as well as the theories and background assumptions informing them. Rather than being committed to any individual theory, the model for evaluation and development of quality described in this document combines several theories into a structure that is a well-founded match with Finnish ECEC.

As one of the basic elements of the quality evaluation and development model put together by the expert body was used the quality framework for early childhood education and care prepared in the European CARE project[6]. This project approaches quality diversely and, guided by systemic theory, through factors of quality and the attributes describing them, or indicators. The expert body assessed critically the compatibility of the European indicators with the Finnish context and used the indicators as a foundation for its work. The more detailed division of the indicators was informed by a theoretical framework for ECEC quality[7] formulated by a task force representing the EU Member States, in which quality is approached through factors related to the structures and pedagogical processes of early childhood education and care.

To ensure compatibility with the Finnish early childhood education and care system, a national model for evaluating ECEC quality developed at the University of Oulu in the late 1990s[8] and an updated later version of this model[9] were used to define the quality factors and their indicators. An analysis of ECEC quality and the factors influencing it produced by the VakaVai project[10], which investigated the impacts of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, provided a topical perspective for the model for evaluation and development of quality.

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4   Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1295/2013; Act amending sections 1 and 2 of the Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 582/2015

5   Government Decree on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1317/2013

6   Moser et al. 2017

7   European Quality Framework for Early Childhood and Care 2014

8   Hujala et al. 1999

9   Hujala & Fonsen 2010; 2011

10   Puroila & Kinnunen 2017

While quality has traditionally been considered important and it has been stressed in ECEC steering documents, defining it in unambiguous terms has proven a challenge. Quality is a relative concept, as it is always connected to not only time but also the society and culture around us and the meanings produced by them[11].

In general, quality refers to compliance with requirements. When defining ECEC quality at the national level, it is essential to examine the factors considered important and desirable in early childhood education and care; in other words, what type of values held in society underlie the idea of high-quality early childhood education and care in Finland. The document describes the underlying values of early childhood education and care in Finland, which are seen to direct quality evaluation. In this document, the definition of quality is regarded as being formulated in a shared democratic negotiation influenced by the prevailing values of society and the multiple meanings brought to bear on the definition by different parties[12].

The national indicators of ECEC quality describe high-quality and desirable early childhood education and care in a concise form and thus provide guidelines for consistent evaluation at the national level. The quality indicators were derived from the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, and national and international research on key factors of ECEC quality. For the research review provided in this document, the expert body examined and analysed research literature relevant to ECEC quality and selected works whose findings are relevant to Finnish early childhood education and care, its quality factors, and the indicators describing them.

ECEC organisers and private service providers may prepare more detailed evaluation criteria and tools based on these indicators. Drawing on this document, FINEEC will in the future produce evaluation criteria and shape the criteria further into evaluation tools.

> **The multi-voiced process of defining ECEC quality is influenced by a number of parties and viewpoints simultaneously: children, guardians, ECEC staff, researchers, policy-makers responsible for legislation and national steering, and entire society with its prevailing values.**

The expert body's interpretation of ECEC quality, its evaluation and the tools used to support evaluation is development oriented. This approach reflects the current interpretation and understanding of quality and its evaluation underpinned by research evidence related to early childhood education and care. Rather than as an immutable and unambiguous truth, the model of quality evaluation and development is consequently presented in this document as a point of departure for desirable factors that define good early childhood education and care and the indicators describing them. The ECEC steering system is undergoing a strong transformation, which is why assessing and updating this document after its introduction will be essential. As this

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11 Alila 2013; Pence & Moss 1994

12 Pence & Moss 1994, Hujala et al. 1999; Parrila 2002; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 2007; Hujala, Fonsén & Elo 2012; Alila 2013

is the first time quality evaluation principles and indicators are being formulated for Finnish early childhood education and care, assessing the usability and effectiveness of the quality indicators and establishing the extent to which this view of desirable goals is shared will be a particular priority. In keeping with the principles of enhancement-led evaluation, both the model for evaluation and development of quality and the indicators will be modified and developed further where necessary.

Preparing guidelines and recommendations for evaluating ECEC quality is part of more extensive efforts to develop the evaluation of Finnish early childhood education and care. This document lays the foundation for FINEEC's national quality evaluation system that will be put together in the years to come. The purpose of the system will be to support ECEC organisers and service providers in their statutory self-evaluation task and to produce information for national evaluations.

> **National steering creates a framework complemented by research evidence of what should be considered high quality and desirable activities. This document introduces the quality factors of Finnish early childhood education and care and the indicators describing them.**

In addition to supporting the self-evaluation and quality management of ECEC organisers and private service providers, the aims of a uniform evaluation system include consistent production of cumulative monitoring data. Additionally, the national quality evaluation system strives to improve the reliability of evaluations.

Evaluation data to support ECEC development is produced diversely at all levels extending from child groups to the national level. In the course of the work aiming to develop the system, both users and stakeholders will be consulted to ensure the usefulness and workability of the system.

This document, Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education, was prepared by an expert body appointed by FINEEC. Rather than as representatives of their organisations, the members of the body were selected on the basis of their work history and expertise. The members were Kirsti Karila, Professor, University of Tampere; Susanna Kinnunen, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, University of Oulu; Virpi Mattila, Director of Early Education, City of Espoo; Thomas Nukarinen, Early Education Manager, Municipality of Liperi; Sanna Parrila, Development Manager, Ediva Oy; Jenni Salminen, Post-doctoral Researcher, University of Jyväskylä; Hanna Sulonen, Planning Officer, City of Tampere (autumn 2017), Senior Inspector of Education, Regional State Administrative Agency for Western and Inland Finland, area of expertise in education and culture (spring 2018); Laura Repo, Counsellor of Evaluation, FINEEC, Expert Body Chairperson; and Janniina Vlasov, Senior Advisor, FINEEC. The document was also commented and worked on by Professor Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen from the University of Jyväskylä and Post-doctoral Researcher Maiju Paananen from the University of Tampere, who are members of FINEEC's group carrying out an evaluation of the implementation of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education. While this document was being prepared, key stakeholders were also heard, including representatives of municipal and private early childhood education and care services.

1.2 Tasks and objectives of early childhood education and care

The national steering system of early childhood education and care has undergone major changes in recent years. The reformed Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and a mandatory National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care now inform the development of ECEC content in greater detail and a more goal-oriented manner than before.

Early childhood education and care is part of the Finnish education system and an important stage on the child's path of growing and learning[13]. Early childhood education and care promotes children's lifelong learning and the implementation of equity in education. Early childhood education and care refers to a systematic and goal-oriented whole consisting of education, instruction and care with particular emphasis on pedagogy.[14] In early childhood education and care and its planning, delivery, evaluation and development, the primary focus should be on the child's best interest[15].

Institutional early childhood education and care is organised by municipalities, joint municipal authorities and other service providers, and it may be offered at a day-care centre, in family day-care or as open early childhood education and care. Open ECEC services usually refer to activities organised by a municipality or the private or third sector, including club and play activities, playground activities and open day-care centres.

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care contains provisions on a child's right to early childhood education and care and the aims of ECEC[16]. Under the Act, the aim of early childhood education and care is to

1. promote the holistic growth, development, health and wellbeing of every child according to the child's age and development;
2. support the conditions for the child's learning and promote lifelong learning and the implementation of equality in education;
3. carry out versatile pedagogical activities based on the child's play, physical activity, arts and cultural heritage, and enable positive learning experiences;
4. ascertain that the child's early childhood education and care environment fosters development and learning and is healthy and safe;
5. safeguard an approach that respects children and ensure that the interpersonal relationships between the children and the early childhood education and care staff are as stable and long-standing as possible;
6. provide all children with equal opportunities for early childhood education and care, promote parity and gender equality, and help the children develop their capacity to understand and respect the general cultural heritage and each other's linguistic, cultural, religious and ideological background;

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13 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 8
14 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 2
15 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 4
16 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 3

7. recognise the child's need for individual support and provide the child with appropriate support in early childhood education and care, including support involving multiprofessional cooperation where necessary;

8. develop the child's interpersonal and interaction skills, promote the child's ability to act in a peer group, and guide the child towards ethically responsible and sustainable action, respect of other people and membership of society;

9. ensure that the children can participate in and influence matters concerning them;

10. act together with the child and the child's parents or other persons who have custody of the child for the benefit of the child's balanced development and holistic wellbeing, and support the parents or other persons who have custody of the child in their task of bringing up the child.

1.3 Statutes, regulations and recommendations informing evaluation

One of the changes brought about by the reform of the ECEC steering system concerns evaluation. A duty of self-evaluation applies to all organisers of early childhood education and care and all operating forms. This means that the organisers methodically and regularly evaluate their own activities, their strengths and their development needs. Private service providers also have an obligation to evaluate their activities.

In legislation and curricula, the evaluation of the national steering system for instruction and education combines into an integral whole. The legislation on early childhood education and care[17], basic education[18], general upper secondary education[19] and vocational education and training[20] is underpinned by the same principles of evaluation as a rule.

> **Section 24 of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care[21] lays down the following provisions:**
>
> **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.**
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> **The core results of the evaluation shall be made public.**

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17 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 24 (Translated from the original Finnish Act)
18 Basic Education Act 628/1998, section 21
19 General Upper Secondary Schools Act 629/1998, section 16
20 Vocational Education and Training Act 531/2017, section 126
21 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 24

In addition to their self-evaluation task, ECEC organisers and service providers must participate in external evaluations of their activities. Carrying out external evaluations of early childhood education and care, as well as of all national education and training, is a task assigned to FINEEC[22]. National steering and oversight are also carried out by other key parties directing early childhood education and care as indicated by their statutory tasks. The most important ones of these parties are the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Agency for Education, the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health Valvira, and the Regional State Administrative Agencies.

In other words, the legislation[23] obliges the organisers and service providers to evaluate their activities, while it does not specify in detail how the evaluations should be conducted. The organisers must evaluate their activities systematically, but they may select their own methods of doing so.

Under the updated legislation, both children and their parents or other guardians must be given opportunities to participate in and influence the planning, implementation and evaluation of the child's early childhood education and care[24]. Selecting the manner in which these opportunities for participation are provided for guardians and children is up to the organiser.

Transparency is an essential aspect in terms of the reliability of evaluation. In this context, all legislation applicable to organisers of education and training states that key evaluation findings must be published. However, the legislation does not provide detailed instructions on how, where and in what scope the findings should be published.

Depending on the scope and goals of the evaluations, information on their findings is disseminated regionally and/or within the relevant unit. Children and their guardians must also be informed of the evaluation findings. Additionally, political and administrative decision-making bodies in municipalities need regular evaluation data to support their decisions.

Under the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, a municipality may organise the duties associated with early childhood education and care either by performing them itself or outsourcing the services to parties specified in the Act. When ECEC services are outsourced to other service providers, the municipality or joint municipal authority must be able to ascertain that the outsourced services meet the standards required of municipal activities[25].

Private ECEC service providers are responsible for the quality of their activities, and they must meet the requirements set for the service package offered to the clients. A private service provider must prepare a self-monitoring plan to ensure that their ECEC activities are appropriate[26]. The service provider must post the self-monitoring plan in a public place and monitor its implementation[27].

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22 Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1295/2013; Act amending sections 1 and 2 of the Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 582/2015
23 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018
24 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 20
25 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 5
26 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 48
27 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 48

Self-monitoring stresses responsibility for the quality and goal-oriented nature of the activities. The self-monitoring plan must specify how the unit collects feedback on the adequacy and content of the service and client safety, how the feedback is processed, and how it is used to develop the activities. In addition, the self-monitoring plan should include a description of the procedure for corrective actions[28]. A private service provider must have a designated director (day-care centre) or an officer (family day care) who ensures that the place in which early childhood education and care is provided and the early childhood education and care activities conducted in it meet the relevant requirements[29].

1.4 ECEC evaluation at the national, regional and pedagogical activity level

Evaluation data on ECEC is produced together by different actors and at many different levels. The tasks and responsibilities associated with evaluation differ depending on whether it takes the form of external evaluation *at the national level*, self-evaluation *at the local level*, or self-evaluation in units *at the level of pedagogical activities*. Evaluation produces data and findings for the use of organisers, private service providers, staff, residents and policy-makers alike. As a whole, information produced from different viewpoints and based on different data sets lays the foundation for the systematic development of early childhood education and care.

Evaluation at the national level

At the national level, early childhood education and care are steered through legislation, the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, steering by resources, evaluation and steering by information. Early childhood education and care are also steered through expert knowledge and research evidence. The national ECEC steering system plays a key role, which influences general education policies and finds its concrete expression in the daily activities of ECEC organisers and providers. The national steering system strives to provide the preconditions for maintaining equity, equality and quality in early childhood education and care. The goal is to guarantee a uniform educational continuum from ECEC to basic education and beyond in all parts of the country.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre is responsible for national evaluations of ECEC and the development of evaluation[30]. FINEEC carries out external evaluations of ECEC organisers' and private service providers' activities. In ECEC, thematic, status and system evaluations are mainly conducted, focusing on themes that are topical and critical in societal terms, or some area or state of the education system. External evaluations produce reliable information on the state of

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28 National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health Valvira, regulation register no 3344/05.00.00.01/2014. Regulation on the content, preparation and monitoring of self-monitoring plans for private social services and public services for older people

29 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 45

30 Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1295/2013; Act amending sections 1 and 2 of the Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 582/2015

early childhood education and care in Finland. This information can be used further to support the development of the activities at the national, local and pedagogical activity level. National evaluation data is also used for the purposes of international comparisons.

In addition to conducting national external evaluations, FINEEC's tasks include supporting ECEC organisers in self-evaluation[31]. This document and the creation of a national ECEC quality assessment system are a key part of the tasks described above and the first step towards the overall development of ECEC evaluation.

FINEEC's activities are based on the principles of independence of evaluation and enhancement-led evaluation[32]. Independence means that attempts to protect different interests must not affect the conducting of evaluations or their findings. Enhancement-led evaluation stresses the principles of participation and impact. It emphasises trust between the evaluator and those participating in the evaluation as well as ECEC organisers' and private service providers' duty to develop the quality of their activities. For more information on the theoretical frame of reference of enhancement-led evaluation and its links to the different levels and practical work of ECEC, see section 2.3.

FINEEC's evaluations are carried out following an evaluation plan adopted for a four-year period[33]. The plan also includes the targets for national evaluation of ECEC. In connection with the planning and selection of ECEC evaluation targets, different stakeholders are consulted to ensure that, as far as possible, the evaluation themes are topical in terms of ECEC development and that they have societal relevance.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre

- participates in ECEC development by producing independent evaluation data
- carries out external evaluations of ECEC following the national evaluation plan
- supports ECEC organisers in their statutory self-evaluation task
- develops the evaluation, evaluation techniques and evaluation methodology of ECEC.

Evaluation at the local level

At the local level, ECEC organisers and private service providers must evaluate the organisation of services as a whole, as well as local ECEC curricula and their implementation. ECEC organisers and service providers must also participate in external evaluations of their activities.[34]

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31 Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1295/2013, section 2
32 Government decree on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1317/2013, section 1
33 Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1295/2013, section 5; Government decree on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1317/2013, section 2
34 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018

The local ECEC curriculum points the direction for the organisation and delivery of early childhood education and care. The local curriculum is not only a guiding norm and an obligation but also a strategic and pedagogic document that should be evaluated and developed[35]. Local curricula shall be formulated to determine, steer and support the organisation of early childhood education and care both in municipal and privately provided services[36].

The local curricula translate into concrete terms the national objectives set for ECEC, local special features, any special emphases and the children's needs. The curricula lay the foundation for daily activities, point the direction for development, and thus guide the tasks of both the organiser and the pedagogical activities. The local curricula make the objectives of ECEC visible, enabling evaluations with reference to them.

At the local level, evaluation takes the form of self-evaluation. This means collection and production of data in different ways on the services they provide by the organiser or the private service provider, the processing of evaluation data, making conclusions on the data and, ultimately, developing and modifying the activities. The aim is at developing not only the activities but also the service system, the service package and the service network to ensure continuous improvement of the activities.

> **Self-evaluation is part of an ECEC organiser's or private service provider's quality management; in other words, part of the management system and a leadership tool. Self-evaluation is a form of evaluation that primarily produces information about the activities, operating culture and prevailing values for the internal use of an ECEC organisation.**

Self-evaluation is an essential element in a learning organisation. An organisation capable of evaluating and analysing its prevailing practices critically and without prejudices is also capable of changing them[37]. In terms of the organisation's development, it is crucial that when evaluation data is primarily produced for the organisation's internal use and in order to develop its own activities, the data must describe the activities truthfully and concretely.

Consequently, ECEC organisers and private service providers must have a well-functioning quality management system in order to evaluate quality, develop their activities and achieve continuous improvement. Among other things, the quality management system helps to ensure that evaluation data collected on child groups reaches the entire organisation up to the political decision-makers. In order to create a quality management system and to put the evaluation culture on a permanent footing, a methodical, long-term and goal-oriented approach is required. Quality evaluation can be integrated in the organiser's administrative processes, incorporating it in existing practices and structures. Quality management can be promoted by such means as clarifying the division of responsibilities and clearly defined task areas.

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35   National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, p. 9
36   National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, p. 9
37   Virtanen 2007, 177–178.

An ECEC organiser or a private service provider

- creates effective quality management and evaluation structures
- regularly and systematically monitors and evaluates the early childhood education and care organised by it, ECEC plans, and their implementation in different operating forms
- makes decisions on organiser and unit level evaluation methods and publication channels
- ensures the children's and guardians' participation in the evaluation process
- draws on the information obtained through the evaluation in service management and development
- participates in external evaluations.

Evaluation at the level of pedagogical activities

In this document, the level of pedagogical activities refers to early childhood education and care provided for child groups in all operating forms. At the level of pedagogical activities, the evaluation focuses on the staff's activities and ECEC quality experienced by the child. Consequently, the evaluation does not concern the children's characteristics, their level of development or learning outcomes. An evaluation is a pedagogical process led by professionals and carried out together with the children, the staff and the guardians.

ECEC pedagogy refers to a methodical and goal-oriented entity comprising education, instruction and care, which finds its concrete expression in staff-child interaction, the operating culture of the ECEC community, the learning environments and the staff's professional work practices[38]. Pedagogy has close links to the cultural values and ideas of learning that prevail in early childhood education and care, and the emphases given to it vary at different times[39]. What is considered important in early childhood education and care, its objectives and tasks or, for instance, in how children learn is reflected in pedagogy and ideas of its quality. This is why pedagogy must be evaluated and developed continuously.

At the level of pedagogical activities, evaluation mainly takes the form of self-evaluation. One objective of self-evaluation is to help the staff examine their own pedagogical activities in keeping with the objectives that steer early childhood education and care.

> A precondition for goal-oriented self-evaluation is the staff's reflective work approach, or an ability to become aware of your own work and its development. This means that the staff must be able to justify all of their practices by pedagogical reasons and, if necessary, change the way their act.

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38 adapted from Alila & Ukkonen-Mikkola 2018
39 Karila 2013

The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care states that "the preconditions for developing the operational culture include pedagogical leadership, which entails goal-oriented and systematic leadership, assessment and development of the entity of early childhood education and care"[40]. At the level of pedagogical activities, the preconditions for evaluating the operating culture and developing it are created through systematic, effective and appropriate leadership structures and a quality management system.

At the level of pedagogical activities, the starting points for planning, implementing, documenting, evaluating and developing the activities are the local ECEC curricula based on the National Core Curriculum, the children's ECEC plans, and the quality indicators presented in this document.

The children's individual ECEC plans are plans prepared together by the staff and guardians stating how the children's individual learning, development and wellbeing can be supported, promoted and monitored in early childhood education and care as part of the child group. When preparing these plans, it should be noted that rather than merely plans for monitoring a child's learning and development, they are agreements on the pedagogical actions to which the staff commit themselves in the plans. At an annual assessment of a child's ECEC plan, the child, the guardian and the staff consider how the goals for the activities and agreements set down together have been achieved.

Children's participation and right to be involved in influencing matters relevant to their lives lay the foundation for the staff's pedagogical activities. Goal-oriented planning, implementation and evaluation of pedagogy should also leave space for children's initiatives and objects of learning and exploration arising from their curiosity. The child's opinion should also be investigated and taken into account when preparing his or her ECEC plan[41].

> At the level of pedagogical activities, the leader ensures that the values and goals of steering documents are translated into pedagogical practices. This requires not only pedagogical leadership but also creation and maintenance of good working conditions, utilisation and development of the staff's professional competence and education, and overall organisation of the activities.[42]

At group level, the overall responsibility for the children's ECEC process, or the planning, evaluation and development of the way pedagogy is implemented in practice, rests with a qualified ECEC teacher.[43] The responsibility for implementing high-quality pedagogy belongs to all staff members regardless of their professional title or the ECEC operating form.

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40 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, p. 19
41 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 23
42 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 19
43 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 23

At the level of pedagogical activities

- self-evaluation refers to goal-oriented, methodical and continuous evaluation carried out by the staff and superiors
- children's and guardians' participation in the evaluation process is enabled
- evaluation focuses on pedagogical activities and learning environments
- the objectives of evaluation stem from the steering system, expert knowledge and research evidence as well as ECEC quality indicators derived from them
- the implementation of local ECEC curricula, the National Core Curriculum, and the children's ECEC plans is evaluated together with the guardians and children
- ECEC quality is improved and developed based on the development areas emerging in the evaluation.

Principles of evaluation in early childhood education and care

Before presenting the model for evaluation and development of quality (Chapter 3), the basic premises of systematic quality evaluation are discussed. This Chapter explains the evaluation principles that may be used at the local level as part of quality management and for evaluating the level of pedagogical activities. The purpose of the Chapter is to assist readers in using the evaluation model and the quality indicators presented at the end of this document in support of evaluation and development. It follows the principles of enhancement-led evaluation and explains how enhancement-led evaluation is an apt method for ECEC organisers' self-evaluation.

The evaluation of early childhood education and care differs somewhat from the evaluation of other sectors of education. The unique features of educational activities with young children should be taken into account in the evaluation, as rather than specifying goals for the *child's* learning or competence, the acts and documents informing early childhood education and care focus on steering the delivery of early childhood education and care in a manner that supports children's learning, development and wellbeing[44]. The evaluation thus focuses on the activities of the ECEC staff and stresses a reflective work approach and critical examination of their own activities by the staff. In other words, we can say that the evaluation of ECEC is a tool for the overall development and steering of pedagogy.

2.1 Systematic evaluation of early childhood education and care

Evaluation data is collected in order to develop and improve the activities, which is why it should be gathered in different ways and using a variety of methods. Evaluation refers to the examination of an activity (or an issue) by measuring it against the set goals. A precondition for evaluation thus is defining attributes and objectives for what is being evaluated.

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44   Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018; National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016.

In early childhood education and care, *staff activities* are evaluated, and the first step towards systematic evaluation thus is setting objectives for the activities. The objectives of early childhood education and care have been specified at the national level, and they are based on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care. The contents of the objectives are influenced by Finnish and international research on early childhood education and care, and they are complemented in the local curricula. It is up to ECEC organisers, private service providers and the staff to assess if these objectives are reached in the activities.

Once the objectives have been specified, they can be described in greater detail through *indicators (attributes that describe quality)*. Indicators translate the objectives into a form that can be evaluated. Through indicators, complex information can be summarised into a form that is easier to manage and understand. Indicators offer the possibility of creating practices and principles that are uniform in an appropriate manner.

A prerequisite for collecting systematic evaluation data is that the indicators are further conceptualised into *evaluation criteria*. Criteria are clear claims or questions that describe the practice. The activities to be evaluated are compared to the criteria, and on this basis, conclusions can be made on how well the criteria are fulfilled; in other words, at what level the activities are currently carried out. The criteria should thus describe the desired aspect either qualitatively or quantitatively. In the simplest form, the finding related to an evaluation criterion is that it is either met or not met. Signs or key figures (evaluation criteria) describing, for instance, the standard of activities (deficient, good, excellent) are also referred to as criteria.

This document contains ECEC quality indicators on the basis of which ECEC organisers and private service providers can prepare more detailed evaluation criteria. FINEEC will also produce evaluation tools and a digital evaluation system to support organisers' self-evaluation.

Based on the defined criteria, evaluation tools will be provided for carrying out the actual evaluation. In the evaluation, diverse information on whether or not the set objectives have been reached is collected. Depending on the needs and objectives related to the activities, different evaluation methods may include various surveys, systematic observation, or processes related to pedagogical documentation.

Figure 1 presents the structure of systematic evaluation using an example in which the objective is based on the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care. The Figure illustrates the differences between a long-term objective, an indicator and a criterion, and presents one way of shaping the criteria into an evaluation tool, which can be used to carry out the evaluation.

LONG-TERM OBJECTIVE
The child's learning is supported by a peer group.

INDICATOR
Each child has an experience of belonging to a peer group.

CRITERION
An adult ensures daily that each child has an opportunity to participate in play together with other children as an equal group member.

EVALUATION TOOLS
Each child participates in playing with others every day (yes/no), or do the adults guide the children to enable the participation in play of children who are excluded (never, seldom, often, daily).

The evaluation tools may be quantitative or qualitative.

FIGURE 1. An example of the progress of a systematic evaluation.

A systematic evaluation may also start with a *need*, in which case its progress may be described using the following *example*:

NEED
Bullying occurs in the peer group and it must be stopped.

GOAL
The group's operating culture shapes up to promote, maintain and develop a feeling of togetherness.

INTERVENTION
A plan to prevent bullying is prepared for the group and implemented.

EVALUATION
The impact of the intervention is assessed and documented with a suitable method.

OUTCOME
The feeling of togetherness has increased in the group, and there is less bullying.

EFFECT
All children feel safer.

IMPACT
Individual level impact: The children's empathy skills improve, their acts of empathy become more frequent and their moral develops.

Societal impact: More advanced empathy skills are reflected on the children's lives at school and later on in life.

FIGURE 2. An example of a needs-based evaluation process.

It should be remembered, however, that due to the nature of quality as something shaped by time and culture, indicators and criteria may fail to include aspects whose evaluation is essential in terms of the quality encountered and experienced by children. The Finnish ECEC steering system stresses the child's best interest and children's rights as priorities. Diversely implemented evaluations ensure that sufficient attention is focused on the child's experience of the situation, regardless of the type of criteria used to evaluate the activities. In keeping with 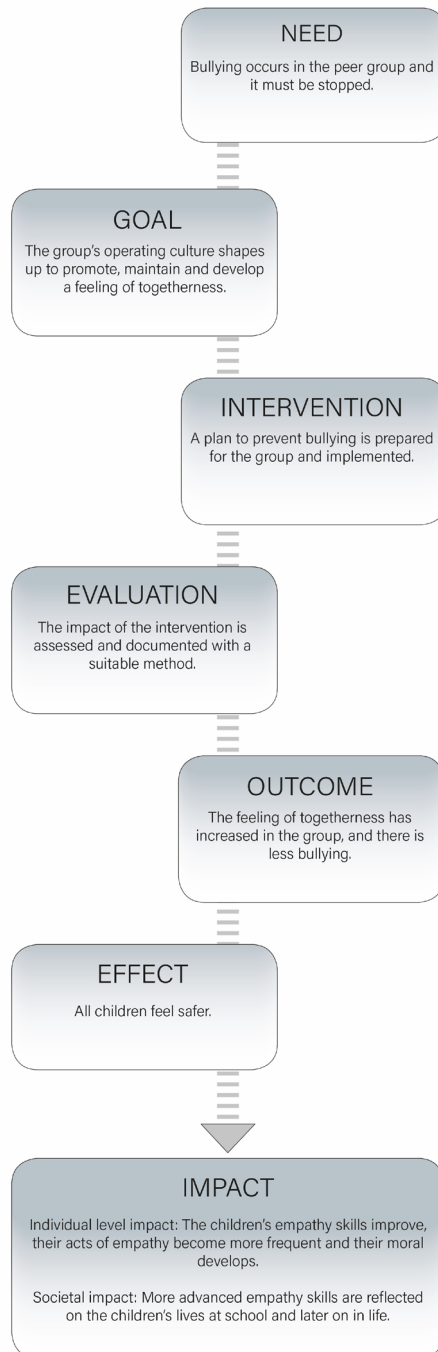the principles of enhancement-led evaluation, evaluation should be carried out using a number of different methods and from a variety of perspectives, not losing sight of the primary importance of the quality encountered by the children.

> Quality indicators and criteria may fail to include aspects whose evaluation is essential for the quality encountered and experienced by children. Diversely implemented evaluations ensure that sufficient attention is focused on the child's experience of the situation, regardless of the type of criteria used to evaluate the activities.

What follows the evaluation and how the evaluation data is used play an important role in the success of the evaluation. Evaluation always means attributing a value to something, and it should thus also be examined from the viewpoint of ethics. When we define indicators for quality and criteria, we should note that they are always value judgements. Consequently, it is vital to have a shared discussion from different perspectives on the purpose and objectives of the evaluation and the conclusions made on the findings.

Ethically sustainable evaluation is fair and transparent, and its methods and results are reliable[45]. Evaluation should challenge the organisation to improve its quality. The ultimate goal of evaluation thus is encouraging the actors to make improvements, develop themselves and try their best.

2.2 Evaluation as part of quality management

ECEC evaluation should be part of the organiser's or private service provider's more extensive quality management system. In other words, the development of activities should be linked to the organiser's and private service provider's strategy, values, vision and mission. This is why the foundations of the organiser's quality management should also be evaluated regularly. This overall development of activities is referred to as quality management.

To enable the use of evaluation data collected at different levels as part of quality management, suitable structures for doing so must be provided. In this context, the timely use of data collected on individuals and groups as the basis of development work is essential. Among other things, it is vital to establish how, through what types of structures, and in which form the evaluation

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45 Atjonen 2007, 33-36

data is passed on from the child groups all the way to decision-makers in the municipality or organisation. On the other hand, information on how the evaluation supports the organisation's leadership is needed, both in the municipal and the private sector.

The evaluation and development of early childhood education and care are associated with the principle of continuous improvement, or development as a process. A precondition for effective quality management is that clear goals have been set for the activities and that the actors are committed to these goals at all levels. Planning, action, evaluation and development follow each other in a cyclical process. Figure 3 describes the process-like nature of continuous improvement. Along the same lines, ECEC development is a methodical process that progresses stage by stage. The Figure also illustrates the more detailed stages of evaluation.
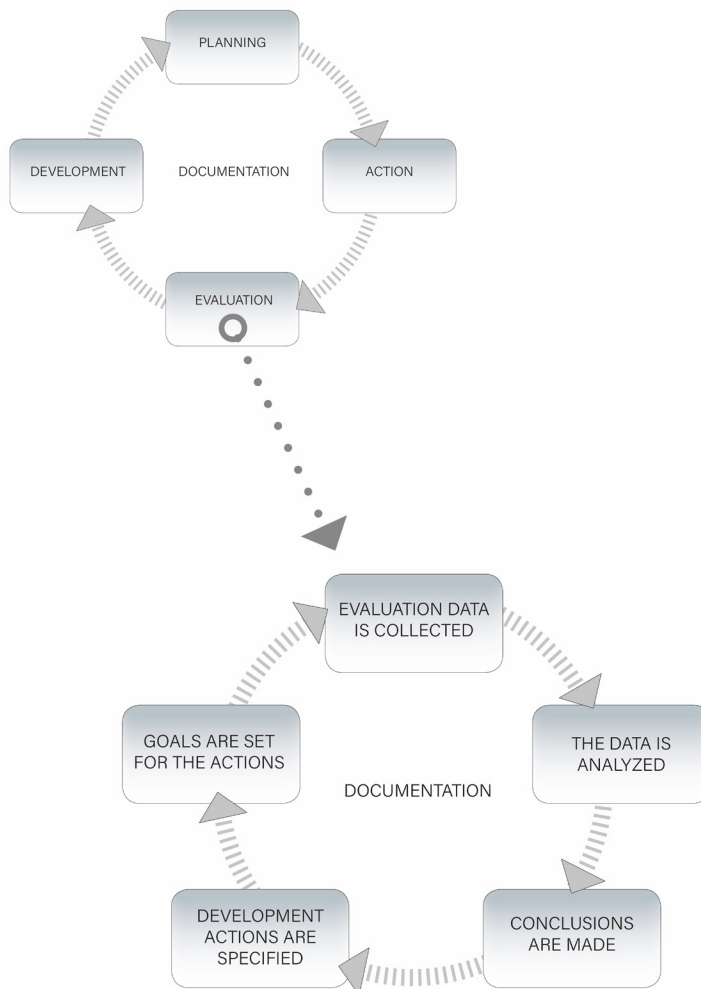

FIGURE 3. A description of continuous improvement and the operating process of evaluation

Collection of evaluation data, reliable analysis of the data and making conclusions on it are also essential elements of systematic evaluation. If evaluation is carried out comprehensively at different levels of the activities, a compilation of the data will give a good idea of their current status. A current status analysis helps to determine the standard of activities or the status of issues; in other words, to identify the strengths or development areas of the early childhood education and care delivered by an organisation. The current status is compared to the national requirements and objectives as well as local strategies and ECEC curricula. This way, the organisation can look into the future and identify aspects of the activities that warrant a closer examination.

> Evaluation can help to support the organisation of ECEC and strengthen pedagogy while also making it visible. A precondition for systematic evaluation is that the methods used to collect, store, analyse and disseminate data are reliable, credible and open.[46] A number of different methods can be used to produce systematic evaluation data.

To support ECEC organisers and private service providers, questions have been prepared through which the entity of quality management can be structured:

1. Is the organiser's/private service provider's quality management methodical and goal-oriented?
2. How does the organiser/private service provider conduct quality management as a whole and evaluation as one of its elements?
3. Is the process of communicating and reporting evaluation data between the organiser/provider and the units smooth?
4. How does the organiser/private service provider organise the collection and documentation of evaluation, monitoring and anticipation data?
5. How does the organiser/private service provider ensure that all interested parties, including the children and their guardians, are informed of the evaluation process and its results?
6. How is evaluation data used in local decision-making and resource allocation?
7. How is evaluation data used to support leadership at different levels of the organisation?
8. How is evaluation data used to improve and develop ECEC quality at the level of pedagogical activities?
9. How does the organiser/private service provider monitor the impact of development carried out on the basis of the evaluation data?
10. Is quality evaluation a natural part of everyone's work?

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46 Välijärvi & Kupari 2010

2.3 Enhancement-led evaluation in early childhood education and care

The national-level evaluation of early childhood education and care in Finland is guided by the frame of reference of enhancement-led evaluation[47]. This section elucidates the key principles of enhancement-led evaluation, which are also highly suitable for local and pedagogical activity level evaluations. Enhancement-led evaluation is a philosophical framework through which both the basic premises and the entire process of evaluation can be examined in greater depth. In keeping with the principle of enhancement-led evaluation, a shared discussion on the objectives, implementation and findings of the evaluation and becoming aware of core areas of the activities are prerequisites of evaluation.

Being founded on trust between the actors is typical of enhancement-led evaluation[48]. In early childhood education and care, the aim of enhancement-led evaluation is to build an evaluation culture where evaluation is based on open discussion and dialogue rather than control or accountability[49]. The purpose of evaluation is to support the commitment to and motivation for their work in ECEC work organisations and among their staff and to help them develop their work practices.

> **The principles of enhancement-led evaluation stress the fact that evaluation is carried out to improve the organisation's activities, not for the benefit of an external evaluator or some other party.**

The starting point of enhancement-led evaluation is that evaluation is seen as a natural part of daily ECEC activities, and that the actual evaluation process and the ensuing development are considered more important than the end results[50]. When evaluation data is actively used to develop activities and work practices, an active influence may be exerted on the progress and direction of the development process in all stages of the activities. The goal is to promote an ECEC evaluation culture where the staff play an active role in evaluating the implementation of pedagogy and where evaluation is integrated in goal-oriented early childhood education and care and daily work practices.

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47   Government Decree on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 1317/2013
48   Räisänen 2005
49   Atjonen & Räisänen 2005
50   Räisänen 2005

> **Enhancement-led evaluation of early childhood education and care stresses future orientation in the activities. This means that instead of looking backwards and stating the facts, evaluation is associated with the possibility of learning.[51] It is thus essential to consider what the objectives of high-quality activities are and what could be done differently tomorrow.**

A key feature of enhancement-led evaluation is that it is carried out in cooperation with different actors and it progresses towards jointly determined goals. In early childhood education and care, this means the participation of staff operating at different levels in the evaluation process, openness and interaction between the actors, and findings that can be used to support development[52]. The primary objective is to produce evaluation data that ECEC staff, organisers and private service providers can draw on to develop their activities.

While enhancement-led evaluation does not strive for generalisations, uniform principles of quality evaluation may produce comparable evaluation data. Rather than producing rankings based on comparisons, enhancement-led evaluation primarily[53] provides information on the organisation's activities for the use of ECEC organisers themselves.

> **Evaluation helps organisers and service providers to identify not only development areas in their activities but also good practices that promote ECEC development. Enhancement-led evaluation stresses peer learning, peer evaluation and the open sharing and use of good practices.**

The frame of reference of enhancement-led evaluation presented in this document and applied to early childhood education and care is based on four principles[54], which are *participation, a multi-method approach, adaptability and transparency*. These are the principles through which the meaning of enhancement-led evaluation in the context of early childhood education and care is defined and the practices related to carrying out evaluations at different levels of ECEC are described.

> **The four key principles of enhancement-led evaluation are participation, a multi-method approach, adaptability and transparency.**

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51 Atjonen 2015; Räisänen 2005
52 Räisänen 2005
53 Räisänen 2005
54 Derived from principles of enhancement-led evaluation formulated by Päivi Atjonen (2015, p. 100).

Participation. The principle of participation plays a key role in enhancement-led evaluation[55]. Participation requires a shared discussion on what should be evaluated and how the information produced by evaluation should be interpreted. ECEC staff, ECEC office holders, guardians and, where applicable, also the children should have de facto opportunities to participate in making decisions on what should be evaluated, interpreting the evaluation information, and preparing proposals for actions based on the interpretation. It is vital to take the children's lives into account as a whole in the evaluation and thus work together with multidisciplinary cooperation networks. For example, basic education or social and health care staff can be involved in evaluations of early childhood education and care.

The manner in which participation in the different stages of the evaluation process takes place for each group varies, for exampling depending on the purposes and objectives of the evaluation. Identifying all parties and stakeholders essential for the evaluation and defining their tasks and responsibilities as part of the evaluation process is important already in the planning stage of the process[56]. Participation aims for clarifying the big picture of the evaluation process to ensure that the goals and purpose of the evaluation are as clear as possible for all parties.

The principle of participation has the objective of ensuring that a diverse and broad-based understanding of the phenomenon to be evaluated can be harnessed for defining the objects of ECEC evaluation, interpreting the evaluation data and preparing proposed actions based on the interpretation. An evaluation process planned and implemented together strengthens the participants' feeling of participation and agency and promotes commitment to development. The principle of participation is based on the democratisation of the evaluation process and the ensuing development process, which makes the evaluation of ECEC and decision-making based on it more transparent.

Multi-method approach. Enhancement-led evaluation is not an individual method or work practice but a more extensive frame of reference, which draws on a number of different, mutually supportive methods in evaluation activities[57]. At different levels of early childhood education and care, evaluation methods should be selected that respond optimally to each situation, target or phenomenon to be evaluated, or the prevailing circumstances. Diverse methods enable evaluation that is as extensive as possible, also enabling the organisation to reach aspects which play a key role in early childhood education and care but which are more difficult to evaluate. The methods used in evaluation may be both quantitative and qualitative.

An ECEC organiser may collect quantitative evaluation data on more general phenomena concerning their organisation by such methods as questionnaires. When the organisation wishes to collect information on the experiences of an individual child, for instance, the method must be compatible with both the objective and child's typical ways of acting. In this case, suitable evaluation methods may include observation or different variations of child interviews, as well as creative, arts-based methods.

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55 Atjonen 2015; Räisänen 2005; Patton 1997
56 Moitus & Saari 2004
57 Atjonen 2015; Räisänen 2005

In addition to enhancement-led evaluation, summative evaluations of ECEC may be carried out as required by the situation. Summative evaluation means an evaluation where the focus is on evaluating the outcome rather than the process. The type of evaluation that should be selected in each case depends on the goals and tasks set for the evaluation.

Enhancement-led evaluation or evaluation related to supervising the quality of activities are mutually complementary, not exclusive. A summative evaluation may, for instance, be associated with a targeted and precisely defined development project. In this case, evaluation is usually carried out at the beginning and end of the project, producing information on the impacts of the development work or on whether or not the goals set for the project were achieved. In addition to charting positive changes, it is equally important to examine the unexpected and unanticipated consequences of the development work.

Adaptability. The principle of adaptability stresses the context sensitivity of evaluation[58]. This means that the objectives of evaluation that supports ECEC development are always defined and tailored for individual organisers in line with evaluation targets identified as essential in the current situation. At the centre of evaluation is the communal learning that takes place during the evaluation process and the new thinking created through learning, which leads into developing the activities based on data produced by the evaluation[59]. The aim is to identify the strengths of early childhood education and care and correct any shortcomings in the activities.

A process-like approach is essentially associated with the adaptable nature of evaluation. This refers to active interaction between the practical work and its evaluation, in which case any evaluation data obtained is immediately put at the organisation's disposal in order to improve activities while the evaluation process is still in progress. When evaluation is adapted to the target's needs in different stages of the process, the evaluation data produced can be expected to have immediate impacts on such areas as the development of work practices[60].

Transparency. Enhancement-led evaluation stresses the transparency of evaluation activities[61]. The purpose of evaluation is to produce new types of creative viewpoints, through which old customs and established practices rooted in the daily work of early childhood education and care can be evaluated critically and on the basis of which development may be directed at issues or processes in need of improvement. Through diverse evaluation methods and in cooperation with different actors, evaluation strives to widen the perspective and reflect on information. A broad evaluation of this type may make visible strengths related to such areas as pedagogical activities, ECEC organisation or work practices, but also shortcomings.

The ECEC activities themselves must be transparent to enable reliable evaluation. This refers to the transparency of both the system's operation and pedagogical activities. Involving guardians and different stakeholders in the evaluation challenges ECEC leaders and staff to communicate about their activities more efficiently and extensively. Evaluation must always be based on

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58 Atjonen 2015
59 Räisänen 2005
60 Atjonen 2015
61 Atjonen 2015

information, on the basis of which conclusions can be made, and consequently the principles related to the organisation of early childhood education and care and pedagogical activities, for instance, must be transparent.

3

Model for evaluating and developing the quality of early childhood education and care

The general principles, systematic nature and development orientation of ECEC evaluation have been discussed above. In order to evaluate ECEC quality together, those participating in the evaluation should have a shared understanding of what quality means. This Chapter describes the model for quality evaluation and development shown in Figure 4 shaped in the work process of the expert body that drafted the document. The model guided the description of evaluation criteria for quality and the formulation of ECEC quality indicators.

Quality thinking is underpinned by the *values* of early childhood education and care, following the principle of mainstreaming. Values lay the foundation for defining quality and show *what* early childhood education and care aims for and *why* something is considered important. They find their concrete expression in the *structures* supporting the activities and the *processes* regulating quality. The structural and process-related factors of quality operate in dynamic interaction and are realised at the national and local level and the level of pedagogical activities.

The *structural factors of quality* are factors associated with the organisation of early childhood education and care, and they are defined and regulated by acts, decrees and other national documents. For this reason, the factors related to structures are relatively permanent. They are linked to such aspects as *who* is responsible for ECEC activities, *where* ECEC activities take place and *what* type of a framework is created for the activities. Consequently, they provide marginal conditions for pedagogical activities.

Process-related factors of quality associated with ECEC activities mean the core functions of early childhood pedagogy and the unit's pedagogical operating culture, both of which have a direct link to the child's experiences. The process-related factors of quality describe *how* the objectives set and the content specified for early childhood education are implemented in practice. The process-related factors are composed of goal-oriented practices that structure pedagogical activities and guiding principles, which are realised in interaction between individuals and contexts.

These different quality factors and the three levels (*national, local and pedagogical activity level)* at which early childhood education and care are regulated are linked to the type of early childhood education and care that is offered and delivered in practice – in other words, the type of *impact* high-quality ECEC has. Impacts include the benefits of early childhood education and care for children, guardians, organisers and society at large.

In keeping with the principles of enhancement-led evaluation, the *process-like nature of evaluation and development* is stressed in quality management as a whole. This is essentially linked to the perspective of systematic evaluation of activities and continuous improvement and development, which is realised in the service organisers' and providers' quality management structures.
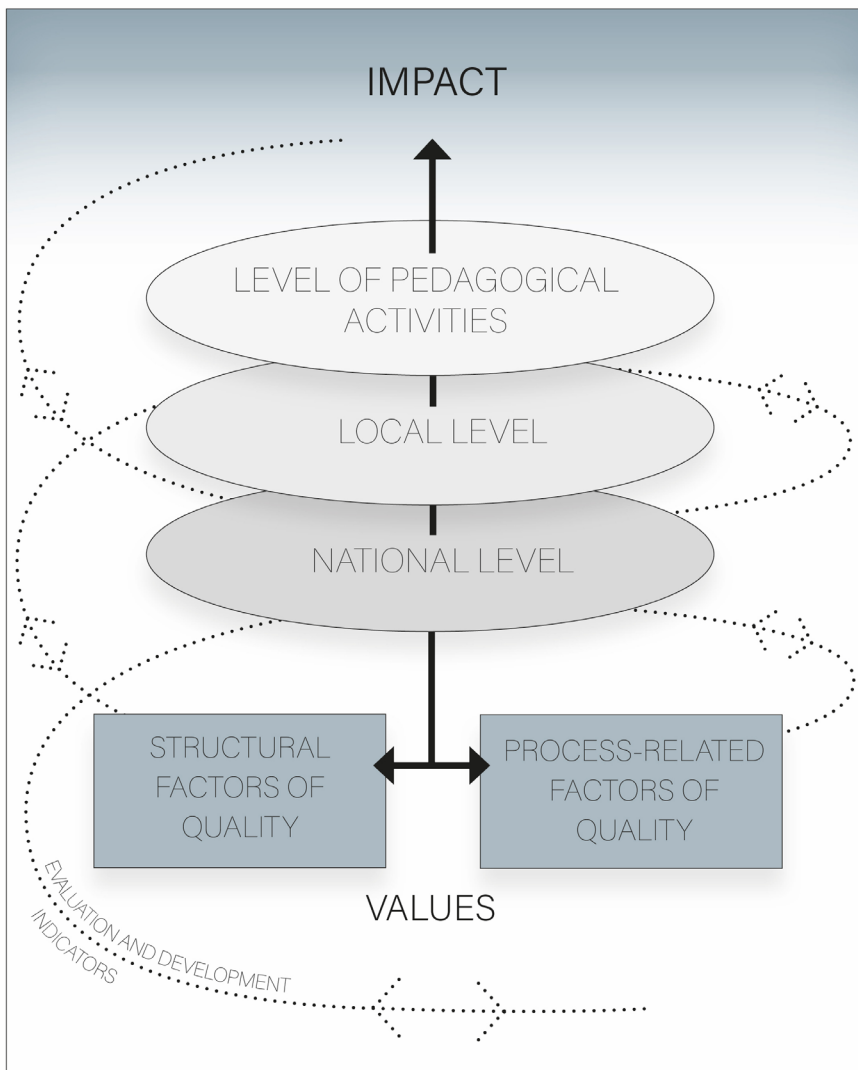

FIGURE 4. Model for evaluating and developing the quality of early childhood education and care

3.1 Values that guide ECEC quality evaluation

Values indicate what good early childhood education and care should aim for and thus lay the foundation for the national-level definition of quality. Values guide all activities and express our idea of good early childhood education and care, and even a good life and good society. A value may be nebulous and unstructured as a concept, which is why it should be defined and its links to practical activities should be demonstrated[62]. ECEC values are translated into visible and concrete goals that guide the activities as ECEC quality indicators, through which the operationalisation of values as activities can be ensured. The underlying values of early childhood education and care are thus manifested as a goal guiding the activities extending from the national level down to the level of pedagogical activities.

While the underlying values of ECEC quality evaluation are in line with the general underlying values of Finnish society, particular attention is paid to key values in terms of quality evaluation defined in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care[63] and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care[64]. In addition to the Constitution of Finland[65], the ECEC steering system is based on international conventions, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child[66] and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[67].

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child lays the legal foundation for early childhood education and care and contains obliging general principles that stress the child's best interest as the primary consideration, a child's right to wellbeing, care and protection, a child's right to culture, play and arts, consideration of a child's views as well as the requirement of fair and equal treatment and the prohibition of discrimination against children. Each child has thus the right to be heard, seen, noticed and understood as himself or herself and as a member of his or her community[68].

Key aims of Finnish early childhood education and care include promoting social justice, creating preconditions for open democracy and wellbeing, and preventing children's social exclusion. Finnish early childhood education and care stresses promoting the child's best interest and emphasises every child's right to receive support for their holistic growth, learning and wellbeing[69]. When defining ECEC quality, a view of the *intrinsic value of childhood*, according to which each child is unique and valuable just as he or she is, takes centre stage[70]. These values are based on the child's rights, and they are realised from the perspective of the principles of full membership in community and inclusion, among other things.

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62 Johansson, Emilson & Puroila 2018

63 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, sections 2, 3 and 4

64 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 19

65 Constitution of Finland (731/1999)

66 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

67 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2007

68 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 19

69 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, sections 4 and 12

70 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 19

Early childhood education and care support children's growth as human beings[71], and this aim is described especially through cultural values, which include striving for truth, goodness, beauty, justice and peace. *Cultural values* are manifested in our attitudes to ourselves, other people, the environment and information, in the ways we act and in our willingness to do what is right. These are issues in which children need support and individual guidance[72]. Bullying, violence, racism or other types of discrimination are not acceptable in any form or by anyone in early childhood education and care[73].

In addition to the ones listed above, key values of early childhood education and care include *equity, equality and diversity*. In early childhood education and care, all children must be guaranteed equitable opportunities to develop their skills and make choices independently of reasons associated with, for instance, gender, origin, cultural background or other reasons related to the person. The preconditions for cooperation with families based on trust, respect and openness also include recognizing and acknowledging of the diversity of families.[74]

Values related to *a sustainable way of living* and its social, cultural, economic and ecological dimensions are also stressed in early childhood education and care. Early childhood education and care support the child's growth towards ecosocial knowledge and ability, allowing people to understand ecological sustainability as the precondition for social sustainability and the realisation of human rights.[75]

The following section discusses the structural and process-related factors and mechanisms of quality that, in the light of research, are known to have an impact on the achievement of the values described above and the objectives stated in legislation.

3.2 Research review of structural quality factors

Structural factors of quality in early childhood education and care refer to relatively permanent properties regulated at the national level which, on the one hand, lay the foundation and create the marginal conditions for early childhood education and care at all of its levels. On the other hand, requirements related to the contents of structural factors arise from the process-related factors of quality. Structural factors of quality can thus either promote or hinder the realisation of core ECEC processes.

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71   National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 19

72   National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 19

73   Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 10; National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016

74   National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 19

75   National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 19–20

ECEC steering system and objectives

National *legislation* creates the point of departure for early childhood education and care by setting for it objectives and a number of obliging structural marginal conditions which are filtered from the national level through local-level steering and decision-making all the way to the child's experience at the level of pedagogical activities[76]. The legislation on early childhood education and care reflects society's prevailing views and values related to children's education, instruction and care in a wider sense, and it also reacts to societal changes, including the economic situation or growing diversity of the community[77]. These factors have an impact on ECEC organisation and the direction in which it is steered and developed.

As structural factors of quality that contribute to safeguarding equity may be regarded the *adequacy, availability, accessibility*[78] *and inclusiveness of services*[79]. The purpose of these factors is to guarantee children equal opportunities for participating in and benefiting from high-quality early childhood education and care, regardless of reasons associated with, for instance, gender, origin, cultural background or other reasons related to the person[80]. The requirement of equality also contains the objective of dismantling hierarchies that may produce differences between individuals.

It has been proven that participation in high-quality early childhood education and care is linked to children's cognitive development and later academic success[81], as well as to the development of social skills and skills of self-regulation[82]. In Finnish early childhood education and care, primary emphasis is on a child's right to high-quality ECEC and the significance of a good childhood here and now[83].

In the practical realisation of sufficiency, availability, accessibility and inclusiveness, the strategy and leadership system directing local ECED and the system of political decision-making play a key role. Through effective and well-planned structures, implementation of national-level statutes and decrees in the daily work of early childhood education and care can be ensured[84].

Additionally, timely and comprehensive *guidance and advice for guardians* related to the ECEC service system can support children's access to early childhood education and care, thus promoting equal access to services[85]. When examined at the national level, the diversity and local variations of the ECEC service system and operating forms are a challenge to children's equal opportunities to apply for and access early childhood education and care[86]. This increases the need for guidance and service counselling.

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76 Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care 2014
77 Bronfenbrenner 1979; Litjens & Taguma 2010
78 Pitkänen et al. 2017
79 Eerola-Pennanen & Turja 2017; Viitala 2014
80 Halmetoja 2016; Karila 2012; Onnismaa, Paananen & Lipponen 2014
81 Sylva et al. 2004; Sylva 2014; Hall et al. 2013
82 Andersson 1992
83 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018; National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016
84 Tomasevski 2001; Pitkänen et al. 2017
85 Karila, Kosonen & Järvenkallas 2017
86 Karila et al. 2017

The diversity of services also sets challenges and requirements for *the steering of ECEC services*[87] and *the steering and oversight of private early childhood education and care*[88]. The results of the CARE project, for example, show that a lack of national standards or statutes, responsibility for oversight decentralised to the local level, or differing views of the necessity of supervision may emerge as challenges related to oversight[89]. High-quality early childhood education and care and equal access to it may be guaranteed if the guidance, advice and oversight related to service provision and delivery are carried out regularly and comprehensively in different ECEC operating forms, both in the public and the private sector[90]. FINEEC's evaluation of ECEC plan implementation indicates, however, that especially the division of responsibilities between municipal organisers and private service providers should be clarified[91]. According to this evaluation, fulfilment of the obligation to steer private services varies.

The accessibility and availability of early childhood education and care also set structural marginal conditions for the children's different *transitions* in the ECEC system and beyond. The extent to which a child's growth is seen as a continuum in the organisation of services, service counselling and, for example, provision of local services has an effect on the vertical and horizontal transitions occurring on children's ECEC path[92]. The adequacy, availability and accessibility of services have an indirect impact on children's vertical transitions (e.g. from home to ECEC, from ECEC to pre-primary education and further to basic education) and horizontal transitions (e.g. between day-care centre groups or different service forms) alike. If the transitions fail to combine into a logical continuum or if they have not been prepared carefully, the positive effects of ECEC on children's development, for example, may be reduced or even lost later at school[93].

Based on research, we can note that the higher the quality of early childhood education and care and the subsequent basic education, the more positive joint impact they have on children's holistic development[94]. In this context, the quality of early childhood education and care and basic education refer to the overall quality of the learning environment, which includes both the characteristics of the physical environment, such as the facilities, equipment and other resources, and also factors related to interaction and pedagogical activities. The inclusiveness of the system also plays an important part in the smoothness of transitions. The smoothness of transitions is particularly significant when this is indicated by a family's socioeconomic situation or cultural or linguistic background[95].

Children's needs for support for their development and learning, which the updated normative documents refer to as individual support needs, are also interpreted within the framework of inclusiveness. In keeping with the principles of inclusion, children's individual support needs are

87 Puroila & Kinnunen 2017
88 Repo et al. 2018
89 Resa et al. 2016
90 OECD 2011
91 Repo et al. 2018
92 Kagan 1991; Ackesjö 2013; OECD 2017; Alila 2017
93 Magnuson et al. 2007; Barnett & Hustedt 2005
94 Sammons et al. 2008
95 LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008; Peters 2010

responded to diversely by providing the support in the child's primary operating environment, rather than moving the child elsewhere[96]. This way, equal possibilities to develop and learn together and from each other as part of the community are guaranteed for all children, avoiding exclusion[97]. Research has shown that children with individual support needs benefit in general from inclusive early childhood education and care. Among other things, this is manifested as children's peer learning in positive interactive relationships and the development of social skills and playing skills[98]. Inclusive early childhood education and care has also been found to have a positive influence on the attitudes of, and promote tolerance in, those children who have not been identified as needing individual support.

Research indicates, however, that great variations between organisers occur in the definition and recognition of individual support needs and resource allocations based on them[99], which results in variations in the quality of staff-child interaction and the possibilities of offering versatile pedagogical support[100]. Support for development and learning as a structural and inclusive principle thus needs to be specified at the national and local level and the level of pedagogical activities alike.

The curriculum for early childhood education and care is a key structural factor of quality. The values, objectives and principles that guide early childhood education and care at different levels and in different age groups are laid down in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care. The curriculum describes the contents of activities that support children's holistic development.

In the ECEC system, the curriculum also plays a key role in the quality of early childhood education and care[101], as it steers the planning and delivery of ECEC through a common goal setting[102]. The curriculum operates at multiple levels in Finnish early childhood education and care: as a national-level document, it provides the underlying framework and structure for local and any unit-level curricula, defining the key contents and perspectives of a child's ECEC plan. Research indicates that using curricula in pedagogy has a positive impact on children's development and learning[103] and the smoothness of transitions[104]. A joint curriculum for pre-primary and basic education and passing on written information, including the children's pre-primary curricula, from pre-primary education to the school predict a faster development of the children's skills at school[105]. The more extensive content-related trends of the curriculum that are defined nationally are significant for both the planning of the activities and children's development. For example, a link has been observed between a curriculum that finds a balance between holistic learning and

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96 Alijoki & Pihlaja 2011; Turja 2017; Pihlaja & Neitola 2017
97 Pihlaja & Neitola 2017
98 Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2014
99 Pihlaja & Neitola 2017; Alijoki & Pihlaja 2011
100 Eerola-Pennanen & Turja 2017; Repo et al. 2018
101 OECD 2017, 150–151
102 Brodin & Renblad 2015
103 Bierman et al. 2008
104 Ahtola et al. 2012
105 Ahtola et al. 2011

different areas of learning on the one hand and high-quality pedagogical activities on the other[106]. As documents, children's ECEC plans are also a significant part of the structural entity formed by national steering by curricula[107].

ECEC staff and leadership

Qualified and competent ECEC staff and leadership are an important part of high-quality early childhood education and care. At the national level, the legislation specifies *ECEC staff qualifications* and, to some extent, also regulates uniform *basic training* at educational institutions of the field. Several studies indicate that in developed countries, a third-level qualification is linked to a higher quality of learning environments or processes[108] as well as more child-oriented pedagogy and more diverse linguistic support[109]. Research has shown that ECEC staff's higher level of education has, above all, a positive impact on the staff's professional attitudes, knowledge and skills and, through them, potentially on children's development or learning[110]. In addition, the contents, quality and duration of the education programme has a major influence on shaping up the staff's competence and professional skills. Staff with a high-quality education are able to offer interaction that is more stimulating and warmer and provides more support for a child than other staff members, which has positive impacts on the child's development[111]. Additionally, in-service training and professional development have been identified as key structural factors that improve activities related to education or instruction in a number of studies[112]. In-service training contents that are as good a match as possible with the staff's professional needs also appear to be significant[113].

Well-educated and competent staff is the best guarantee for the delivery of high-quality early childhood education and care[114]. Consequently, maintaining the staff's professional competence by means of in-service training is also a matter of national-level interest[115]. Studies have found that staff members who have more extensive work experience engage in more positive, sensitive and linguistically rich interaction with the children and regulate the children's behaviour in a more constructive manner than employees with shorter work experience[116]. In general, the benefits of in-service training and support for professional competence during a staff member's career are seen indirectly at the level of pedagogical activities, in particular.

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106 Slot et al. 2016
107 Alasuutari & Karila 2010
108 Burchinal et al. 2002; Degotardi 2010
109 Faour 2010
110 Manning et al. 2017; Fukkink & Lont 2007; Campbell-Barr 2017
111 OECD 2006
112 Dennis & Horn 2014; Hamre et al. 2012; Slot 2018
113 Barber, Cohrssen & Church 2014
114 OECD 2012, 144
115 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 39
116 Salminen et al. 2012; Slot et al. 2015

An appropriate *leadership system* at the local level is a key structural factor of quality which enables successful steering of development and changes within the organisation[117]. ECEC organisers' municipal strategies and private service providers' individual strategies together with leadership create important structures for not only the planning and implementation of activities but also the evaluation and development processes of pedagogy at different levels of the organisation[118]. Research indicates that effective, high-impact leadership that enhances ECEC quality is associated with an organisation's clearly defined and shared basic mission, objectives and leadership strategy[119].

Preconditions for the continuous improvement of pedagogical development and activities in ECEC include appropriate *evaluation and development structures* on which decision-making and development are based[120]. Evaluation, and systematic data on the activities produced through evaluation, are a key part of the management system and leadership[121]. According to Finnish studies, interaction between the organisers' political decision-making and steering system on the one hand and pedagogical activities on the other should be increased further by sharing and clarifying leadership responsibilities[122].

As a structure, the *leader and leadership* also influence the activities of ECEC units at the level of pedagogical activities[123]. The attributes associated with a leader, including goal-orientation and vision, good team work skills in relation with the staff, and an ability to communicate interactively with guardians, contribute to promoting goal-oriented ECEC activities[124]. Studies have also proven a link between the leader's level of education and ECEC quality: when the leader's educational level was higher, the unit's operation at the level of both structural and pedagogical ECEC processes was also assessed to be higher[125].

Learning environments of early childhood education and care

The structural marginal conditions laid down in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, including *group size*, *adult-child ratio and the personnel structure,* have an impact on the ECEC learning environment and, indirectly, also the pedagogical activities carried out in it. The *resources* allocated to ECEC, which include not only the financial resources but also the physical premises and materials, additionally have an impact.

The connection of *group size and adult-child ratio* with ECEC quality has been investigated in a number of international studies, but so far the findings have been inconsistent. Some of the studies reported positive impacts from a smaller group size on children's development[126] and

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117 Van Velzen et al., 1985; Harris et al. 2002
118 Fonsén 2014; Heikka 2014
119 Akselin 2013; Hujala 2013; Nivala 1999
120 Heikka 2014; Heikka 2016
121 Virtanen 2007
122 Heikka 2014
123 Fonsén 2014; Heikka 2014; Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs 2004
124 Muijs et al. 2004; Bloom, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni 2007
125 Taggart et al. 2000
126 Magnuson, Ruhm & Waldfogel 2007; Yan & Lin 2005

pedagogical work of a higher quality[127]. On the other hand, it has been proven that the group size or adult-child ratio only are individual quality factors, and in most cases, the combined effects with other structural factors are more important than the direct impacts[128]. In the analyses of Finnish data in the CARE project, for example, a significant combined effect linking ECEC staff's educational level and work experience with the quality of interaction was found: the higher the staff's educational level and the more work experience they had, the more smoothly organised and efficient the activities were[129]. It was also found that the larger the child groups were, the poorer the socio-emotional support provided by the staff and the organisation of the activities were.

An appropriate *personnel structure* is an important factor of structural quality. The staff must have sufficiently versatile professional competence to achieve the objectives and goals stated in the acts and degrees in an ECEC unit. There must be a correlation between the objectives of ECEC, staff qualifications and professional competence. According to a recent national study, the personnel structure and qualification requirements in ECEC services previously failed to meet the competence requirements required under the legislation[130]. This shortcoming was addressed by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, which entered into force in autumn 2018.

The structures and planning of working time contribute to the possibilities different professional groups among the staff have of delivering systematic early childhood education and care in line with their training. National studies and research indicate that the savings aimed for in the field of ECEC have resulted in actions striving for increased efficiency in units, as a result of which working time planning is partly directed by the viewpoint of savings rather than the staff groups' professional competence[131]. In other words, the work is directed more by an interpretation of multiprofessionalism, in which the tasks, duties and obligations are tied to a certain shift, rather than professional training or competence[132].

Different *physical and economic resources* also influence the concrete delivery of early childhood education and care. The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care[133] refers to resources in the section dealing with learning environments. In this context, resources mean the physical facilities, locations, practices, and equipment which support children's growth, learning and interaction in early childhood education and care. Many studies and analyses have found that characteristics related to learning environments are key factors of structural quality, although proving their straightforward significance for the quality of early childhood education and care has so far been challenging to prove[134].

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127 Hattie 2005; Brühwiler & Blatchford 2011; Slot et al. 2015; Pessanha et al. 2017

128 OECD 2017; Slot et al. 2015

129 Slot et al. 2015

130 Puroila & Kinnunen 2017

131 Pitkänen et al. 2017; Paananen 2017

132 Karila & Nummenmaa 2001; Karila 2008; Karila & Kinos 2010; Karila & Kupila 2010; Onnismaa & Kalliala 2010; Onnismaa, Tahkokallio & Kalliala 2015

133 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 22

134 Hartman et al. 2016; Pessanha et al. 2017

Healthy and well-functioning facilities form the physical base for a high-quality learning environment. The functionality of the facilities alone does not guarantee high-quality pedagogy, as pedagogical planning ultimately determines the way the activities shape up and how the child experiences the activities in the facility. Financial resources, on the other hand, direct in a broader sense the physical resources on which ECEC is delivered at the local level and the level of pedagogical activities.

The structural factors of quality are given their meaning and shaped by culture and time as well as in relation to each other and the process-related factors of quality. This means that a good physical setting of an ECEC unit does not alone guarantee high-quality early childhood education and care if there are shortcomings in the process-related factors[135]. The simultaneous examination of structural and process-related factors of quality is thus a precondition for successful evaluation of quality[136].

> **The combined impact of structural quality factors has been found to predict process quality better than individual structural factors.[137]**

For the structural indicators of ECEC quality based on a review of research in structural quality, see section 4.1.

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135 Raittila & Siippainen 2017
136 Hartman et al. 2016; Sheridan 2007; Slot 2018
137 Slot et al. 2015

A summary of research describing the structural factors of ECEC quality

Legislation on early childhood education and care
Legislation creates the basic premises for early childhood education and care and its organisation by setting the objectives and several obligatory structural marginal conditions for it. Legislation reflects societal values and choices, which influence the direction in which early childhood education and care is steered and developed.

Adequacy, availability, accessibility and inclusiveness of early childhood education and care
The purpose of the adequacy, availability, accessibility and inclusiveness of early childhood education and care is to guarantee children equal opportunities for participating in and benefiting from high-quality early childhood education and care, regardless of such reasons as gender, origin, cultural background or other reasons related to the person. It has been proven that participation in high-quality early childhood education and care has a positive link with children's cognitive development and later academic success, as well as with the development of social skills and skills of self-regulation.

Curriculum guiding early childhood education and care
The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care directs the planning and delivery of ECEC through a shared goal-setting. Research indicates that using a curriculum in pedagogy has a positive impact on children's development and learning. The curriculum operates at multiple levels in Finnish early childhood education and care: as a national-level document, it provides the underlying framework and structure for the local and potential unit-level curricula, defining the key contents and perspectives of a child's ECEC plan.

Staff's basic and in-service training and other competence development
Research has shown that ECEC staff's higher level of education has, above all, a positive impact on the staff's professional attitudes, knowledge and skills and, through them, potentially on children's development or learning. The benefits of in-service training and support for professional competence are seen indirectly at the level of pedagogical activities, in particular.

Guidance and counselling related to ECEC for guardians
Timely and comprehensive guidance and advice related to the ECEC service system for guardians can support children's access to early childhood education and care, thus promoting equal access to the services. In the national context, the diversity of the ECEC service system and operating forms stresses the importance of guidance and counselling directed at guardians.

Guidance, advice and oversight related to ECEC services

High-quality early childhood education and care and equal access to it may be guaranteed if the guidance, advice and oversight related to service provision and delivery are carried out regularly and comprehensively in different ECEC operating forms, both in the public and the private sector.

Uniform educational system and transitions

The adequacy, availability and accessibility of services have an indirect impact on children's vertical transitions (e.g. from home to ECEC, from ECEC to pre-primary education and further to basic education) and horizontal transitions (e.g. between day-care centre groups or different service forms) alike. From the perspective of children's wellbeing, growth and development, ECEC transitions should provide logical horizontal and vertical continuums. Smooth and well-planned transitions can further enhance the positive impacts of ECEC on children.

Structures for evaluating and developing early childhood education and care

Preconditions for the pedagogical development and continuous improvement of activities in ECEC include appropriate evaluation and development structures underpinning decision-making and development. ECEC organisers' and private service providers' quality management systems are a key element in evaluation and development structures and lay a foundation for conducting systematic evaluations.

ECEC leadership system

An effective leadership system fit for its purpose enables successful guidance of the organisation's development and any changes. ECEC organisers' and private service providers' individual strategies as well as leadership create important structures for not only the planning and implementation of activities but also the evaluation and development processes of pedagogy at different levels of the organisation.

Staff structure and resources reserved for ECEC

The preconditions for achieving the objectives set for early childhood education and care in an ECEC unit include the staff's diverse professional competence and the allocation of sufficient resources for early childhood education and care. There must be a correlation between the objectives of ECEC, staff qualifications and professional competence.

Working time structures and planning in ECEC

Working time structures and planning contribute to the possibilities different professional groups among the staff have of delivering systematic early childhood education and care in line with their training. When drawing up and planning the working time structures in ECEC, it should be ensured that the staff's tasks, duties and obligations are based on their professional training and competence rather than being assigned to a certain shift. From the viewpoint of ECEC quality, particular attention should be paid to this issue.

Child group structure and size
The size of the child group or the adult-child ratio only are individual factors affecting quality, and in most cases, the combined effects with other structural factors are more important than the direct impacts. For example, a significant combined effect between ECEC staff's educational level, work experience and the quality of interaction has been observed: the higher the staff's educational level and the more work experience the staff had, the more smoothly organised and efficient the activities were. The research has also found that the larger the child groups are, the poorer the socio-emotional support provided by the staff and the organisation of the activities.

Learning environments of early childhood education and care
From the perspective of the structural factors of quality, healthy and well-functioning facilities are the physical starting point for a high-quality learning environment. The functional characteristics of the facilities alone do not guarantee high-quality pedagogy, however, as pedagogical planning ultimately determines what shape the activities take and how the child experiences the activities in the facility.

3.2 Research review of process-related quality factors

Process-related factors of ECEC quality mean core functions with a direct link to the child's experiences; in other words, how curricula are translated into pedagogical activities in a child group. The factors of process-related quality manifest themselves in daily encounters between ECEC staff, children and families. Process-related factors of quality associated with ECEC include pedagogical activities and the way they are led, planned, implemented, evaluated and developed in relation to objectives specified in the curricula. Other key factors include complex interactive relationships between children, adults, guardians and staff members, and the different parties' experiences of participation. Similarly to quality in general, process-related factors are also strongly tied to a certain time, place and cultural reality.

Child-adult interaction

Child-adult interaction is a key process-related factor of quality in ECEC work. The nature of child-adult interaction is defined through the basic mission of education and instruction[138]. The underlying values of and legislation on early childhood education and care also refer to the significance of the interaction relationship, especially its safety and stability. In studies, child-adult interaction and its quality have been analysed using a number of theoretical models which

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138 Värri 2002

recognise the staff's significant role in education work. A number of recent studies dealing with child-adult interaction and its quality have examined this phenomenon from the perspective of three broader theoretical dimensions[139].

Firstly, the quality of interaction is influenced by the *emotional support* offered by the adult in group-level interaction. High-standard emotional support consists of a sensitive way of encountering the children in the group and noticing their emotional and cognitive needs and an ability to respond to these needs, taking the children's viewpoints and initiatives into account[140]. Sensitivity means, on the one hand, an adult's ability to notice and become aware of individual children's social, emotional and physical basic needs and to understand the child's world of experience; on the other hand, it means a simultaneous ability to see the pedagogical value and significance of different interactive situations[141]. Emotional support also includes a positive atmosphere that combines the staff's active role and every group member's experience of pleasant interaction[142]. As the cornerstone of a positive atmosphere may be regarded the staff's and children's respectful and positive manner of being together. For example, this may be manifested as physical closeness, social interaction, smiles, encouragement and joy of shared activities[143]. The staff's sensitivity has been proven to promote children's safe attachment, especially in the day-care centre's context[144]. High-quality emotional support is also linked to children's better social skills[145] and attachment to learning situations in pre-primary education and in school age[146].

Another factor affecting process quality is the *organisation* of the group's activities and regulation of behaviour, which refers to systematic and proactive means used by the staff to reinforce positive behaviour in children. Rules and agreements negotiated together, clear expectations concerning behaviour and, for instance, making use of transitions for pedagogical purposes support children's consistent and goal-oriented action[147]. In particular, positive emotional support and constructive regulation of behaviour together appear to improve children's social skills and reduce problem behaviour both in early childhood education and care and lower comprehensive school[148].

The third dimension of process quality is *instructional support*, which means interactive support for a child's development and learning. High-quality instructional support refers to using diverse and rich language in daily interactive situations and the ways in which ECEC staff can support and

139 Eccles & Roeser 1999; Brophy 2000; Hamre et al. 2013
140 Hamre et al. 2013; Ahonen 2015
141 Puroila, Estola & Syrjälä 2012; van Manen 2008
142 Rasku-Puttonen 2006
143 Pianta, La Paro & Hamre 2008
144 Ahnert, Lamb & Seltenheim 2006
145 La Paro et al. 2014
146 National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD ECCRN). 2002; 2005
147 Bohn et al. 2004; Ponitz et al. 2009; Hännikäinen 2005
148 Broekhuizen et al. 2016

make visible children's learning processes, for example through diverse feedback and linguistic modelling. Studies indicate that high-quality instructional support promotes cognitive development and the learning of academic skills[149] as well as supports concept formation and thinking[150].

All in all, high process quality is described by balanced and sensitive interaction that takes children's initiatives and interests into account in all three dimensions. Research has shown a link between this and, among other things, better social and pre-academic skills in children and children's stronger interest in learning[151]. The quality of interaction is also linked to its stability. In other words, the stability of interactive relationships also has a key significance for the impacts that the quality of interaction has on children's learning and development[152].

Another way of analysing the quality of child-adult interaction widely used in international and Finnish studies is to structure it in the context of child-initiated and adult-directed pedagogy or practices of bringing up children[153]. The child-initiated approach based on socio-constructivism means that the child is at the centre of the activities and the child's interests are accounted for in goal-oriented activities, whereas the staff also play an active role in guiding and enabling the child's or children's independent activities and learning[154]. Research indicates that child-initiated interaction and pedagogical practices have a positive impact on the development of social skills and learning in children[155]. Teacher-directed learning interaction based on behaviourism, on the other hand, comprises activities regulated and planned by the teacher. According to studies, there is also a time and place for this type of interaction, for example in the learning of basic skills and especially for those children who need more adult support and guidance in their activities. An adult's interaction with children rarely is purely child-initiated or teacher-directed, however, as it often combines both approaches[156]. In studies concerning basic education, a positive impact on children's literacy has been shown in classrooms where the teacher's activities are a flexible combination of both a child-initiated and teacher-directed approach[157].

Pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care

Pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care are a core factor of process quality with a number of sub-factors. *Firstly,* pedagogical activities are based on a systematic entity consisting of education, instruction and care, in which quality is guaranteed by *responding to children's basic needs and supporting development, learning and wellbeing.* Responding to children's basic needs and

149 Howes et al. 2008; Mashburn et al. 2008

150 Pianta et al. 2008

151 Siekkinen et al. 2013; Broekhuizen et al. 2016; Pakarinen et al. 2014; Lerkkanen et al. 2012

152 Curby, Rimm-Kaufman & Abry 2013; Ruprecht, Elicker & Choi 2016

153 Kinos 2002; Bredekamp & Copple 1997; Stipek & Byler 2004

154 Hujala, Puroila, Parrila-Haapakoski & Nivala 1998; Kinos 2002

155 Lerkkanen et al. 2012

156 Kinos 2002; Stipek 2004

157 Tang et al. 2017

individual developmental capabilities, on the other hand, is linked to supporting their holistic wellbeing. A thriving child has a positive and trustful relationship with their environment, which enables them to make good use of the learning opportunities it offers[158].

Studies have found that staff members' effective team work associated with systematically observing the children and drawing on the observations, in which guiding the children's behaviour is based on knowing them, supports children's ability to tolerate stress[159]. An ability to regulate stress promotes children's physical and psychological wellbeing in early childhood education and care. While high-quality ECEC pedagogy is realised in a group context, at its best it is capable of addressing children's individual needs and interests and, based on them, producing experiences of growth and learning that are meaningful for the children. The perspective of children's wellbeing and meaningful life and a child's personal experiences are key viewpoints in the evaluation of ECEC quality[160].

Secondly, process quality is affected by *content-related trends of pedagogical activities and the conception of the child as a learner.* The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care stresses the viewpoint according to which children learn while using their senses and body holistically, and these practices are further linked to the thematic contents of ECEC: the rich world of languages; diverse forms of expression; me and our community; exploring and interacting with my environment; I grow and develop. Studies indicate that pedagogically challenging methods involving physical exercise[161] and play may facilitate learning and develop perseverance in a child[162].

Play is a significant factor of process quality in itself. Research indicates that in groups of children aged under three, in particular, the quality of adult-child interaction observed in situations of play is of a higher quality than in other situations[163]. Studies have also shown that children play better and learn more when their play is guided and supported by the staff[164].

Children's development, learning and wellbeing are supported by pedagogically diverse and creative practices, including play, physical exercise, literature, music and artistic expression in all of its culturally diverse and rich forms[165]. Through these activities, early childhood education and care develop and support children's cognitive learning. Engaging in music, for example, has been observed to modulate a child's brain and, in particular, brain responses[166]. The brain responses of children who frequently play musical games at home or in leisure activities indicated more advanced differentiation of sounds and heightened alertness. Auditory development through engagement in music may have positive impacts on such areas as learning foreign languages.[167] Studies have also proven a link between playing and practising music and the development of mathematical

158 Viitala 2014
159 Suhonen et al. 2014
160 Alasuutari & Karila, 2014; Karila, 2016; Roos 2015; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson 2013; Puroila & Estola 2012
161 Recommendations for physical activity in early childhood 2016
162 Tomporowski, McCullick & Pesce 2015
163 Slot et al. 2016
164 Fleer 2015
165 Pääjoki 2017; Pönkkö & Sääkslahti 2017; Rantala 2014; Ruokonen 2017
166 Putkinen 2014
167 Putkinen 2014

skills. It appears that early musical practice favours the building of the neural networks that are also used to solve numerical and mathematical tasks[168]. Consequently, versatile musical activities and games in early childhood may play a central part in children's learning.

Exercise and physical activity are preconditions for a child's normal growth and development[169]. Physical activity supports children in exploring and modifying their environment and offers opportunities for participating in play and games requiring physical activity that are typical of their age and level of development[170]. Recent studies have found a connection between physical activity and children's academic performance and more efficient executive function[171]. Poorer motor performance, on the other hand, would appear to correlate with poorer academic skills in children, especially in boys[172].

Children's fine motor skills, including eye-hand coordination, and cognitive contents go hand in hand in different ECEC activities and tasks and thus also play a significant role in early learning experiences[173]. For example, strong fine motor skills in children have been shown to have a link to cognitive learning in the form of better mathematical skills and progress made in mathematics later at school[174]. It would appear that children whose fine motor skills have become automatic may also have better capabilities for learning more complex abstract concepts[175]. Similarly, capabilities for learning more complex contents may be limited if the child has poorer fine motor skills and ineffective executive function[176]. Diverse pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care in which creative methods, exploration and doing things with your hands are used may thus also effectively support children's cognitive development.

High-quality early childhood education and care with its multiple interpersonal relationships, learning environments and diverse operating methods interacts with the cultural, institutional and historical factors of the society around us, and by mediating the broader cultural heritage, dynamically supports children in becoming part of the surrounding society[177]. Early childhood education and care thus appears to have an important role related to general education and culture, which promotes children's growth and development into members of society in a broad sense.

Thirdly, pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care are guided by *the objectives of transversal competence and support for learning processes,* which include thinking and learning; cultural competence, interaction and expression; taking care of oneself and others, managing daily life; multiliteracy and ICT competence; and participation and influence[178]. Rather than ensuring that

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168 Cranmore & Tunks 2015

169 Malina et al. 2004

170 Laukkanen 2016; Pellegrini & Smith 1998, Piaget 1952, Storli & Sandseter 2015; Robinson et al. 2015, Stodden et al. 2008

171 Haapala 2013; Hillman et al. 2008

172 Haapala et al. 2014

173 Cameron et al. 2012

174 Luo, Jose, Huntsinger, & Pigott 2007; Son & Meisels 2006

175 Berger 2010; Holtzer et al. 2007

176 Lawrence et al. 2002

177 Smidt 2009; Vygotsky 1978; Rogoff 2003; 2008

178 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016

children learn precisely defined portions of information, the purpose of education and instruction is to support extensively the development of their understanding and thinking and provide them with concrete skills for acting in a diversifying society[179]. In the broadest sense, these competence areas described in the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care refer to key areas of lifelong learning[180], which are considered developmental preconditions for full membership of society and lifelong learning.

At the level of pedagogical activities, every-day *linguistic interactive situations between children and adults may, at their best, support children's transversal competence by simultaneously promoting the development of their thinking and interaction skills and their experiences of participation*. Goal-oriented interaction that is reciprocal and linguistically rich, takes all parties and different viewpoints into account, and strives for a wider understanding is referred to by such terms as learners' sustained shared thinking[181] and dialogical interaction[182].

Step by step, the staff are challenged to distance themselves from leading the discussion and valuating the responses, and to give space for the children's knowledge and support the construction of knowledge within the group. It is the staff's responsibility to, together with the children, create a safe atmosphere for the group's discussions that supports the participation of all those who are present[183]. Jointly agreed and shared practices should be created for the group, in which everyone has the right to take part in the discussion and be heard and in which discussion is based on shared cumulative opinions. Dialogical interaction has an evidence-based link to the development of children's thinking and self-expression skills and identity[184] and to better learning outcomes in basic education[185]. Additionally, the use of more child-initiated learning situations that encourage team work have been found to modify the conventional interaction setting between a learner and a teacher, making it more equal[186]. Even young children can participate actively in dialogical interaction when the children's curiosity and interests are tapped in the discussion and when their verbal expression is supported and given impetuses to move it forward[187].

Fourthly, the quality of pedagogical activities is fundamentally influenced by *leadership* and the *organisation's operating culture* in which professionalism is manifested and translated into practice. In the leader's role are stressed understanding the basic mission of early childhood education and care and, based on this, putting the shared pedagogical view of the ECEC staff (team) into practice in early childhood education and care work as high-quality pedagogical activities[188]. A clearly defined basic mission and striving for the objectives of ECEC by means of shared leadership are hallmarks of effective leadership[189]. In other words, leadership is ultimately about supporting

179 Wells & Claxton 2002
180 European Commission 2016; Ananiadou & Claro 2009; UNESCO 2011; European Parliament 2006
181 'Sustained Shared Thinking', Siraj-Blatchford 2009
182 Mercer 2002; Alexander 2006; Muhonen et al. 2016
183 Hannula 2012
184 Muhonen et al. 2017; Kumpulainen & Lipponen 2010; Kumpulainen & Rajala 2017
185 Muhonen et al. 2018
186 Kumpulainen & Wray 2002
187 Salminen et al. 2018
188 Parrila & Fonsén 2016
189 Akselin 2013

pedagogical processes. The organisation's operating culture takes shape in constructive and reciprocal interaction between good leadership and competent staff, supporting the delivery of high-quality early childhood education and care. The operating culture, which is the outcome of leadership, provides the framework for ECEC quality and its development[190].

Leadership processes also play a key role in the group's pedagogical leadership. An ECEC teacher with pedagogical training is responsible for their child group's pedagogy: its planning, goal-oriented implementation and evaluation[191]. In recent studies, teacher leadership is understood as distributed pedagogical leadership, which can promote the staff's professional development as well as pedagogical and organisational changes[192]. A precondition for this is evaluating and, if necessary, modifying the prevailing work practices and developing the operating culture[193]. The implementation of teacher leadership requires effective organisation structures, a willingness to adopt shared leadership, and ECEC teachers' personal attitudes towards leading and developing their group's pedagogy[194].

Goal-oriented activities in line with the curriculum in an ECEC unit cannot be carried out without pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development. *Curriculum preparation* at the local level and the level of pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care is part of the pedagogical development of ECEC and pre-primary education, which is influenced by legislation and steering by information as well as broader views of education and instruction[195]. At these levels, curriculum work includes translating the national level curriculum into practice, structuring of education and instruction work in pedagogical terms, and the systematic documentation of this work, and it thus constitutes a strong link in the national quality management work. At the local and unit level, as the guarantees of successful curriculum work may be regarded process leadership, staff commitment and the participation of children, guardians and other partners. Curriculum preparation should thus be seen as a continuous and reciprocal process in which the community strives to constantly develop the curriculum through shared discussions and reflection and, at the same time, its entire operating culture[196].

Preparing a child's individual ECEC plan as part of the curriculum process makes visible those pedagogical processes and practices by which each child's individual growth and development are supported. The preparation of an ECEC plan comprises pedagogical documentation, which has direct links to pedagogical work, children's learning, development and participation as well as cooperation with guardians[197]. In other words, pedagogical documentation comprises both the process and contents of pedagogical activities. The contents reflect what the children say and

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190 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 29
191 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 23; National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 10
192 Heikka 2016; Heikka, Halttunen & Waniganayake 2016a; 2016b
193 Heikka 2016
194 Heikka 2016
195 Poikonen 1999
196 Poikonen 1999; Salminen & Poikonen 2017
197 Alasuutari, Markström & Vallberg-Roth 2014; Bjervås 2011

produce and how this is recorded. The process, on the other hand, refers to how these materials affect pedagogical work[198]. At best, pedagogical documentation serves as an active tool that gives direction to and develops pedagogy.

While ECEC plans are prepared individually for each child, their goal is to offer practical help for the integration of the children's individual goals and support for their achievement with the needs of the entire child group to form a seamless entity of a high pedagogical quality. According to FINEEC's evaluation of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care implementation, the qualitative content of children's ECEC plans vary, and the plans do not always fulfil the spirit of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the National Core Curriculum[199]. The evaluation finds as the main problem associated with the ECEC plans that rather than sufficiently describing how the activities will be organised to support a child's development and learning, they focus on describing the children and their goals[200].

Children's participation in the daily life of early childhood education and care

Children's participation is identified as a key principle guiding early childhood education and care not only in legislation[201] and the National Core Curriculum[202] but also in their underlying values. Participation can be defined as children's possibility of influencing the world around them and their own lives[203]. A precondition for children's participation is that the children can share their experiences, thoughts and feelings with adults who strive to hear the children and interpret their messages[204]. Rather than only being the end result of high-quality early childhood education and care, participation above all indicates coherence between the pedagogical activities and the children's viewpoints and experiences[205]. Participation becomes reality in the pedagogical operating process and the children's feeling of participation[206]. In addition to the home, the ECEC environment is one of the first environments in which children gather concrete experiences of being heard and exerting influence[207] in a 'child-sized' manner suitable for their age and level of development[208].

In the context of ECEC, there is a natural asymmetry in the adult-child interaction, among other things in relation to knowledge, power and conceptions of growth and learning[209]. While the child's status has become stronger and children are today seen more strongly as active agents with initiative and as participants in their own learning and every-day activities, methods of

198 Alasuutari, Markström & Vallberg-Roth 2014

199 Repo et al. 2018

200 Repo et al. 2018

201 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018 540/2018, section 20

202 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 24; 30

203 Kangas 2016; Turja 2007; Roos 2015

204 Roos 2015; Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan 2003

205 Hilppö et al. 2016

206 Hart 1992; Shier 2001; Turja 2017

207 Turja 2017

208 Jans 2004; Kangas 2016

209 Corsaro 2003; Roos 2015; Turja 2017

education and daily practices are slower to change[210]. The conception of a child as an active learner and participant in learning directs pedagogical activities and challenges the staff to re-think and re-organise daily interactive situations in a manner that supports children's participation. The formation of an operating culture that enables children's participation necessitates changes in the relationships between children and adults, above all in the adults' ability to make space for the children's participation[211]. To achieve this, the staff are required to evaluate the beliefs and justifications underlying their activities and even take pedagogical risks in their teams[212]. However, this does not mean that ECEC professionals would abandon their responsibility for education and planning. The professional role is always associated with a pedagogical duty to justify and accept responsibility for daily decision-making, regardless of the level at which participation is implemented[213].

Interaction in a child group and children's peer relationships

A peer group and interaction in a child group, both among the children and with adults, is an important context for a child's development[214]. Children's peer relationships refer to relationships in a group of children of a similar age or level of development[215]. *Children's peer relationships* and interaction with their friends are at the centre of the objectives of ECEC legislation, the shared underlying values and the delivery of early childhood education and care, and they are an inseparable element of process quality. Positive peer relationships and peer acceptance promote a child's social and emotional development and support the development of interaction skills[216]. They may be significant factors in protecting a child from exclusion[217]. Problems in peer relationships (for example rejection) and poor social status in a child group, on the other hand, may later expose a child to mental health problems, poor academic success and negative attitudes towards school[218].

While peer relationships are valuable for children's positive and holistic development in themselves, they are also important in terms of the planning and implementation of pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care. In particular, interaction in the group and the principles of children's togetherness and communal learning guide early childhood education and care at the level of pedagogical activities[219]. In day-care centre groups of even very young children, communal learning described by a feeling of togetherness and reciprocity among the children, the construction of shared meanings and activities through these feelings, and team work and interaction skills is observed[220]. Communal learning promotes children's social and team work

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210 Hujala et al. 1998; Tammi & Hohti 2017
211 Kangas 2016; Rasku-Puttonen, 2006, Roos 2015
212 Hujala & Puroila, 1998; Tauriainen 2000; Turja 2017
213 Salminen 2017
214 Neitola 2013
215 Ladd 2005
216 Hartup 1983; Ladd & Kochenderfer 1996; Laine, 1998; Newcomb & Bagwell 1996
217 Hay et al. 2004; Ladd 2000; Neitola 2013; Syrjämäki at al. 2017
218 Ladd 2005; Laine 1998
219 Koivula & Hännikäinen 2017
220 Koivula 2010

skills, skills in constructing meanings, and interaction and argumentation skills[221]. A strongly teacher-directed approach creates obstacles to communal learning[222], whereas the adults' sensitive interaction with a child group and individual children helps children build their identities and a sense of belonging[223]. Research indicates that children's togetherness in a group is built through diverse means, including linguistic, action-based and material methods. In addition to social interaction, being aware of the role of pedagogical practices and the material environment for creating togetherness is also important.[224].

Well-planned pedagogical activities in a group, both among peers and between adults and children, is a starting point for practising self-regulation skills, social skills and social competence and improving in these skills[225]. Linguistically diverse and constructive interaction between the staff and the children and lower staff stress levels have thus been proven to have a positive impact on the development of children's social skills in Finnish pre-primary education groups[226]. Social skills and skills in self-regulation lay the foundation for constructive interaction and participation in children's immediate interactive relationships[227] but also more extensively for membership in society surrounding them[228]. Good social skills and peer group cohesion also play a key role in preventing bullying[229].

Interaction among staff and multidisciplinary cooperation

At the level of pedagogical activities, the implementation of pedagogy in an ECEC unit depends on *complex professional interaction between staff members*. Staff-child interaction has been found to be of a higher quality at day-care centres where the operating culture is constructive and diverse and where the staff is offered sufficient opportunities for continuous professional development. The strongest manifestations of this have been observed at day-care centres where the staff find that the operating culture supports collegiality and shared decision-making and where clear objectives for educational activities have been set on the basis of a shared view of education[230].

An open operating culture, professionals' good team work skills as well as the flexibility and support of administrative structures also have an influence on engagement in multidisciplinary cooperation and its effectiveness[231]. At the centre of multidisciplinary cooperation is the goal-oriented team work of ECEC experts, the objective of which is to create an extensive support network for the child's development and where families and guardians also have an expert role[232].

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221 Koivula 2010
222 Koivula 2010
223 Hännikäinen 2006; Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen 2010; Laaksonen 2012; 2010
224 Juutinen 2015; 2018
225 Salminen 2014; Syrjämäki et al. 2017
226 Siekkinen et al. 2013
227 Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker 2006
228 Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak 2007
229 Repo 2015
230 Slot et al. 2016
231 Karila & Nummenmaa, 2001; Oandasan et al. 2006; Kvarnström 2008
232 Rantala 2002

Smooth professional interaction among the staff at unit level is also a key to children's smooth (vertical) transitions between groups[233]. Openness towards guardians also plays an important part in the process[234]. Additionally, cooperation and exchange of information between pre-primary education and basic education staff support (horizontal) transitions to school both from the professional and pedagogical viewpoint by creating a logical continuum in terms of children's growth and development[235]. The planning, implementation and evaluation of transition phases in the wider sense are thus part of the operating culture of the staff team's daily work and its development[236].

Interaction between the staff and guardians, or educational cooperation

The quality of the ECEC process is influenced by direct, trustful and equal interaction between ECEC staff and the children's guardians. In the best case, it may broaden both parties' horizons concerning education and development and serve as a link between early childhood education and care and the home[237]. A guardian's meaningful participation in their child's early childhood education and care may thus contribute to improving the quality of ECEC more extensively[238]. Guardians' participation has now been given more prominence as one of the key objectives of early childhood education and care[239], and its genuine realisation has also challenged the actors to rethink the implementation and objectives of educational cooperation from the perspectives of both the parents and ECEC[240]. Interaction between the staff and guardians to some extent continues to be described by more conventional interpretations of expertise, in which an ECEC employee has better knowledge of issues related to a child's development and growth than the guardian[241]. The guardians' experiences of participation can thus be promoted by avoiding an expert-focused approach in cooperation between the staff and guardians. In particular, good starting points for and experiences of guardians' participation in the early phase of the care and education relationship promote constructive educational cooperation also at a later stage[242]. When a child first comes to the day-care centre, the staff's open and positive attitudes towards both the child and the family[243] and acknowledging the shared educational responsibility[244] play a key role.

233 Karikoski & Tiilikka, 2017; Rutanen & Hännikäinen 2016
234 Karikoski & Tiilikka, 2017; Rutanen & Hännikäinen 2016
235 Karila, Lipponen & Pyhältö 2013; OECD 2017
236 Karikoski & Tiilikka 2017
237 Huttunen 1984; Karila 2006
238 Fenech 2013
239 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, section 20; National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016
240 Vlasov 2018
241 Alasuutari 2006; Vlasov 2018
242 Karikoski and Tiilikka 2017
243 Munter 2001
244 Karikoski and Tiilikka 2017

The guardians and ECEC professionals operate on the interface of different views in daily interactions. The point of departure for the realisation of educational cooperation is creating a mutual understanding and trust in the educational task[245]. The findings of a Finnish longitudinal study titled Alkuportaat indicates that Finnish guardians have a high level of trust in ECEC staff[246]. Educational cooperation experienced as good has also been found to prevent negative impacts of parental stress on the child's assessed well-being[247] among parents with atypical working hours.

For indicators for the quality of ECEC processes based on a review of research in process quality, see section 4.2.

A summary of research describing the process-related factors of ECEC quality

Staff-child interaction
The underlying values of and legislation on ECEC stress the importance of the interactive relationship between the child and the adult for the child's positive development and learning as well as the child's life here and now. The legislation also emphasises safe and stable interactive relationships. At the centre of child-adult interaction is the staff's sensitive manner of encountering the children in a group, noticing their emotional and cognitive needs, and meeting these needs responsively while taking the children's viewpoints and initiatives into account. By means of interaction, children's behaviour may also be supported constructively, and diverse support for their linguistic development may be offered. The quality of interaction constructed in this way has been found to have a positive impact on the development of children's social and academic skills and motivational factors.

Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development
Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development in early childhood education and care lay the foundation for the delivery of high-quality early childhood education and care. Comparing the contents and objectives of the ECEC curriculum to a child group's needs is the cornerstone of pedagogical planning. Pedagogically well-planned, diverse, and creative operating methods challenge and inspire children to learn. Documentation is required in order to evaluate and develop pedagogy. Pedagogical documentation of early childhood education and care is a process through which the activities are made visible and can be evaluated together with the staff and children. At best, pedagogical documentation serves as an active tool that gives direction to and develops pedagogy. The evaluation of pedagogy focuses on the staff's activities and ECEC quality experienced by the child.

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245 Karila 2006
246 Kikas et al. 2011
247 Rönkä et al. 2014

Pedagogical activities and learning environments

Pedagogical activities are based on a systematic entity of education, instruction and care, at the core of which lies responding to children's basic needs and supporting their development, learning and wellbeing. The physical and psychological learning environment of ECEC and diverse activities carried out together by the staff and the children in it encourage the children to play, be physically active, explore, create and express themselves, and it is developed further together with the children. A shared and dynamic operating culture of the entire unit influences both the staff's and the children's experiences in the learning environment.

Leadership at the level of pedagogical activities

Aspects stressed in ECEC leadership are understanding the basic mission of early childhood education and care and, based on this, putting the shared pedagogical view of the ECEC staff (team) into practice in early childhood education and care work as high-quality pedagogical activities. A clearly defined basic mission and striving for the objectives of ECEC through the means of shared leadership are characteristics of effective leadership. At the level of pedagogical activities, an ECEC teacher is responsible for their child group's pedagogy: its planning, goal-oriented implementation and evaluation. Studies also refer to this as teacher leadership; the preconditions for its realisation are effective organisation structures, a willingness to adopt shared leadership, and ECEC teachers' personal attitudes towards leading and developing their group's pedagogy.

Peer interaction and group atmosphere

Children's peer relationships and interaction with their friends are at the centre of the objectives of ECEC legislation, the shared underlying values and the delivery of early childhood education and care, and they have a significant intrinsic value for the children in the daily activities. Positive peer relationships and peer acceptance promote a child's social and emotional development and support the development of interaction skills. They may also be significant factors in protecting a child from exclusion.

Interaction among staff and multidisciplinary cooperation

At the level of pedagogical activities, the implementation of pedagogy in an ECEC unit depends on complex professional interaction between staff members. Staff-child interaction has been found to be of a higher quality at day-care centres where the operating culture is constructive and diverse and where the staff is offered sufficient opportunities for continuous professional development. An open operating culture, the professionals' good team work skills as well as the flexibility and support of administrative structures also have an influence on multidisciplinary cooperation and its effectiveness, the purpose of which is to create an extensive support network for the child's development.

Interaction between staff and guardians

The quality of ECEC processes is influenced by direct, trustful and equal interaction between ECEC staff and the children's guardians. In the best case, it may broaden both parties' horizons concerning education and development and serve as a link between early childhood education and care and the homes. A guardian's meaningful participation in their child's early childhood education and care may thus contribute to improving the quality of ECEC.

3.4 Impact of early childhood education and care

Early childhood education and care has been found to have many types of impacts[248] on the children using ECEC services and their families as well as society in a wider sense. However, the positive impacts of ECEC can only be realised when its quality is sufficiently high. Consequently, what happens in the daily life of early childhood education and care is significant.

Above in this document, the structural and process-related factors of quality have been described at different levels of ECEC. The structural factors provide a framework for high-quality activities. At the different levels (national, local and unit level), they also set conditions for how the positive consequences and impacts of early childhood education and care can be realised. The process-related factors have a major impact on what happens in the daily lives of the children, professionals and parents or guardians. The combined effect of structural and process-related factors plays a key role in terms of the positive impacts or consequences of early childhood education and care: both must meet the quality requirements.

Evaluating the impact of early childhood education and care as such is rather challenging. As impact has many dimensions and levels, it is vital to disambiguate the level of impacts we are referring to at any one time. In the context of the societal impact of early childhood education and care, the examination frequently focuses on the mechanisms producing equality or inequality, and especially the possibilities of early childhood education and care to prevent social exclusion and create equal opportunities. The societal impacts of early childhood education and care also include its importance for laying the foundation for the knowledge and skills needed on the future school path and in the workplace and the competitiveness of the nation investing in ECEC in a global world.

Participation in high-quality early childhood education and care can be proven to also have a positive impact from the viewpoint of children's cognitive and social development and families' quality of life. Due to the multiple dimensions of child development and the combined impact of multiple factors, identifying clear causal relationships is not always possible, and it is thus preferable to talk about examining *outcomes*[249]. While the development-related outcomes of ECEC

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248 Karila 2016
249 Melhuish et al. 2015, 7

are already well recognised in the Finnish discussion, ECEC evaluation in Finland does not focus on the children's learning outcomes. Instead, evaluation and quality development focus on the organisation of ECEC services and the pedagogical delivery of the actual early childhood education and care; in other words, the professional activity of the different levels.

Figure 5 illustrates the different dimensions of ECEC impacts[250].

	Present	Future
Individual	Children's quality of life Peer relations Learning new things and skills	Increase of human capital Success on study path and in (working) life Inclusion, citizenship
Society	Men and women have opportunities for maintaining reasonable living conditions and participate in civic life Children's equal opportunities in education	Increase of human capital Cumulative benefits of investments An equal society in which social inclusion results in civil peace

FIGURE 5. Different dimensions of ECEC impacts

In addition to the societal or individual impacts discussed above, the figure also analyses the impacts of ECEC over different time spans. This time perspective is also important for ECEC quality evaluation and development. Currently, early childhood education and care is increasingly seen as an efficient investment in future[251]. In its most extreme form, stressing the perspective of the future in this manner may result in insufficient recognition of the significance and impact of early childhood education and care on children's and families' current quality of life and wellbeing.

In terms of its time perspective, an examination that stresses the present moment draws attention to children's good life here and now. This mentality stresses children's rights and the intrinsic value of childhood. Children are considered valuable as they are, not just as something that will become valuable[252]. Children are regarded as valuable citizens with an equal right to meaningful early childhood education and care that supports their current wellbeing and good everyday life. Hearing children has in recent years been also given more space in research[253], resulting in an

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250 Karila 2016, 11
251 Heckman 2011; Heckman, Pinto & Savelev 2013; Melhuis et al. 2015; Sammons et al. 2014
252 see Alanen 2009 for details
253 Alasuutari & Karila 2014; Roos 2015; Kinnunen & Puroila 2015; Juutinen 2018

advancement in the methods of hearing children's views and experiences. This is why, in keeping with the framework of enhancement-led evaluation, the evaluation should also have a multi-method approach and highlight children's participation. In addition to considering children's participation, the guardians should also be involved in the evaluation process.

The multiple dimensions of ECEC impacts are a good illustration of how the evaluation and development of ECEC quality have significance for both individuals and society. In addition, the significance of quality work stretches over different time spans: it supports the delivery of high-quality early childhood education and care here and now, while it also supports the realisation of outcomes and impacts extending well into the future.

Factors of quality in early childhood education and care and the indicators describing them

This Chapter presents the indicators that describe factors of ECEC quality. The objectives of high-quality early childhood education and care described by the indicators are based on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, the National Core Curriculum and the research discussed in detail in the previous chapters. The indicators summarise the multiple objectives set for ECEC in a form that is easier to manage and understand.

The quality indicators lay the foundation for consistent national-level practices and principles, following which early childhood education and care can be evaluated and, consequently, developed. It is important to note, however, that the indicators describe the objectives of high-quality ECEC at a general level. This is why, in keeping with the principles of enhancement-led evaluation, a multi-method approach should be taken to evaluation to ensure that, in addition to producing general evaluation data, the inclusion of an individual child's experiences can also be secured.

The indicators do not make a suitable evaluation tool as such. More specific evaluation criteria should be defined on their basis for the actual evaluation process. Criteria are attributes that define quality. An effort should be made to find as concrete a wording as possible for them to enable the reliable evaluation or measurement of the attribute in the daily work. Criteria based on the indicators may, for example, be produced by asking "how do we know if the activities are implemented in line with the objective specified in the indicator?"

Figure 4 (p. 40) presents a model for ECEC quality evaluation, in which the structural and process-related factors of quality and the indicators describing them interact dynamically. ECEC evaluation and development form a process-like cycle, and the evaluation objectives stem from the indicators describing ECEC quality. The following sections discuss the quality indicators of Finnish early childhood education and care.

The structural factors of quality are factors related to ECEC organisation at three different levels: the national, local and pedagogical activity level. Specific indicators have been defined in detail for each level. The national-level indicators help to ensure that ECEC quality is realised at the steering system level. The local and pedagogical activity level indicators concern ECEC organisers and private service providers.

Process-related factors of quality are the core functions of early childhood pedagogy with a direct link to the child's experiences. This is why the quality indicators associated with ECEC processes can only be evaluated at the level of pedagogical activities. However, ECEC organisers and private service providers should note that structural solutions and measures lay the foundation for the core functions of pedagogy. In other words, if there are shortcomings in the structures, the quality of the process is usually not high, either.

4.1 Structural factors of ECEC quality and the indicators describing them

Legislation on early childhood education and care

At the national level

1. ECEC legislation is developed ensuring that it secures the organisation, delivery, evaluation and development of high-quality early childhood education and care. The national-level statutes are understandable and comprehensive.

2. The staff-child ratio and the group size and structure specified in the legislation are based on research evidence and expert knowledge regarding ECEC quality and a child's development, and they enable the organisation of pedagogical activities in a manner that allows the achievement of the objectives set for early childhood education and care.

3. The staff qualification requirements laid down in legislation are based on the evolving competence requirements of early childhood education and care. Expert knowledge and research evidence are taken into account in the definition of the qualification requirements.

4. The legislation sets clear and comprehensible objectives, tasks and requirements for the different operating forms of early childhood education and care.

Adequacy, availability, accessibility and inclusiveness of early childhood education and care

At the national level

5. The national steering system safeguards every child's right to early childhood education and care. High-quality services implementing the principle of inclusiveness are available and accessible to all children.

6. The national steering system sets the policies for and safeguards the provision of support for individual development and learning, ensuring that each child receives the support they need.

At the local level

7. ECEC organisers must ensure the availability and accessibility to all children of high-quality ECEC services in which the principle of inclusiveness is implemented.

8. Local ECEC services have been organised to safeguard the provision of support for development and learning, ensuring that each child receives the support they need. The support needed by a child is provided in the child's usual learning environment.

At the level of pedagogical activities

9. The leader of the day-care centre ascertains every day that a sufficient number of staff as required by law and considering the number of children is present, ensuring that the children's safety and the permanence of interactive relationships can be guaranteed and the objectives set for early childhood education and care are reached.

10. ECEC staff ensure that all children can participate in all activities, regardless of their background and individual characteristics.

Curriculum guiding early childhood education and care

At the national level

11. The organisation and delivery of ECEC is guided and regulated by a national-level curriculum that pays attention to children's holistic development, learning and wellbeing and pedagogy that promotes them. The curriculum concerns all children under the school age in all forms of ECEC.

At the local level

12. The locally prepared curriculum translates the national curriculum into concrete terms and serves as a tool for achieving the objectives set for early childhood education and care for the staff.

13. The local curriculum is evaluated together with key stakeholders, including the children, guardians, decision-makers and partners.

Staff's basic and in-service training and other competence development

At the national level

14. The national steering system sets the policies for and promotes the implementation and development of the staff's basic training and methodical and continuous in-service training, ensuring that they meet the needs arising from the delivery of high-quality ECEC services.

At the local level and the level of pedagogical activities

15. ECEC staff's in-service training and other development of professional competence are methodical and based on verified needs for competence development. Staff members are encouraged in pursuing in-service training, and opportunities for doing so are created.

Guidance and counselling related to ECEC for guardians

At the local level

16. Comprehensive guidance and advice related to ECEC services are provided, ensuring that guardians are clearly informed of the ECEC operating forms, their characteristics and their missions.

17. Guidance and advice related to ECEC for guardians ensure that children's equal right to and possibilities for participating in early childhood education and care are realised. The child's right to ECEC is the primary grounds for providing advice and guidance.

Guidance, advice, and oversight related to ECEC services

At the national level

18. The national steering system sets the policies on the guidance of and advice provision for private early childhood education and care at the local level by clearly defining the private service provider's responsibilities and the municipal organiser's duties.

At the local level

19. 19. Guidance and oversight of and advice provision for private ECEC services are implemented ensuring that the achievement of statutory and qualitative objectives set for early childhood education and care is secured in privately produced services.

Uniform educational system and transitions

At the national level

20. A uniform system of education and instruction extending from early childhood education and care to other levels of education ensures that transitions are smooth and secure the availability of equitable continuums on learning paths.

At the local level

21. Children's transitions from home to early childhood education and care, within ECEC services, and further to pre-primary education and basic education are planned and carried out ensuring that the children's learning path is a smooth and equal continuum.

At the level of pedagogical activities

22. The staff together with the children's guardians plan and implement effective practices that support the children's feeling of security and learning when they move from home care to early childhood education and care.

23. Together with other ECEC professionals, basic education professionals and guardians, the staff plan and implement effective practices that promote children's wellbeing and learning for transitioning between different ECEC forms or units or from ECEC and pre-primary education to basic education.

Structures for evaluating and developing early childhood education and care

At the national level

24. The entity of the national evaluation system produces relevant and comprehensive evaluation data. Evaluation is systematic and supports ECEC development and the achievement of the objectives set for ECEC at different levels.

At the local level

25. ECEC organisers and private service providers have an evaluation system through which ECEC services and pedagogy can be developed.

26. Regardless of the forms and organisation methods of early childhood education and care, all parties to ECEC participate in the evaluation and development. This includes actors at the different levels of the organisation, the children and their guardians, and decision-makers.

ECEC leadership system

At the local level

27. The local level has a clear decision-making and leadership system, leadership structures and procedures for early childhood education and care. The leadership system supports the staff's pedagogical work and the children's wellbeing as well as ensures that the objectives set for early childhood education and care are achieved.

28. Leadership in ECEC is based on evaluation, monitoring and anticipation data as well as expert knowledge and research-based evidence. The persons responsible for leadership in ECEC have sufficient expertise in early childhood education and care and leadership skills.

Staff structure and resources reserved for ECEC

At the local level

29. To deliver early childhood education and care, sufficient personnel and financial resources are reserved and the personnel structure is planned to ensure that the objectives set for early childhood education and care are reached and that children's stable interaction relationships with the staff and their peers can be secured.

At the level of pedagogical activities

30. The personnel structure and numbers as well as the other resources in child groups are allocated to ensure that the objectives set for early childhood education and care are achieved and that children's stable interaction relationships with the staff and their peers can be secured.

Structures and planning of working time in ECEC

At the local level

31. The policies and steering regarding working time structures, planning and arrangements ensure that the staff can carry out methodical ECEC work by optimally drawing on their professional training and competence.

At the level of pedagogical activities

32. The working time structures and working times enable the optimal utilisation of the staff's professional competence, taking the children's best interest into account.

Child group structure and size

At the local and pedagogical activity level

33. The structure and sizes of child groups are determined with the children's best interest and wellbeing and the promotion of learning as the primary guidelines.

Learning environments of early childhood education and care

At the local and pedagogical activity level

34. All ECEC learning environments are healthy, safe and diverse and promote learning.

4.2 Process-related factors of ECEC quality and the indicators describing them

Staff-child interaction

1. Interaction is positive, caring, encouraging and gentle. The staff are committed to each child and the child group.

2. The staff interact reciprocally with the children in a manner compatible with the children's development, interests and learning capabilities.

3. 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.

4. The staff's language use is as rich and diverse as possible taking the children's age and level of development into account. The staff adapt their language use to the child's world of experience, verbalise the activities, and encourage children to participate in daily linguistic interaction as permitted by the child's capabilities and skills.

5. The staff take all children in the group into consideration and understand the different ways in which the children express themselves.

Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development

6. 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.

7. 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. Information produced together with the children and using diverse methods is used in the planning, implementation, evaluation and development of the activities.

Pedagogical activities and learning environments

8. ECEC activities are meaningful and inspiring for the children and challenge them to learn.

9. 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.

10. Children's individuality is accounted for, helping each child identify and find their strengths and interests.

11. Meals, rest periods, transitions, dressing and other basic activities are carried out with pedagogical goals in mind.

12. A child's individual needs for support are recognised. The staff assess the need for support together with the guardians, and if necessary, appropriate support is organised for a child in multidisciplinary cooperation.

13. 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.

14. The staff organise the daily transitions to be flexible and consistent, ensuring that the daily routine as a whole supports the child's wellbeing and learning.

Leadership at the level of pedagogical activities

15. 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. Pedagogical leadership is implemented with the support of ECEC teachers and ensuring the participation of the entire staff.

16. 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 of the activities. The entire staff work together to plan, implement, evaluate and develop the pedagogical activities.

Peer interaction and group atmosphere

17. The staff construct a positive learning environment for the children. The atmosphere of the group is safe, warm and caring, and it inspires learning.

18. The staff and the children form a community of learners together in which every child's meaningful participation in the activities is realised. The staff support the children's group activities through their guidance and example.

19. The staff build and guide the group's operating culture systematically, ensuring that it promotes, maintains and develops togetherness. The staff ensure that each child can feel they are members of the group and belong to the group. The staff support the children in establishing and maintaining versatile friendships.

20. The staff ensure that each child thrives in early childhood education and care. The children feel they are heard and valued just as they are.

21. The staff build and maintain in the group an atmosphere based on appreciating the children's individual differences and different cultures, religions and world views. The staff support children's plurilingualism in the group.

Interaction among staff and multidisciplinary cooperation

22. The staff work towards professional interaction based on trust, appreciation and respect as part of the ECEC operating culture.

23. The ECEC staff recognise the different professional groups' professional duties, competence and responsibilities as part of the entity of ECEC work. The staff draw on different skills in ECEC work and its development.

24. The staff recognise their professional responsibilities and competence and those of the parties they work together with, and draw on them in multidisciplinary cooperation.

Interaction between staff and guardians

25. 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.

26. Guardians' participation in planning, carrying out and evaluating early childhood education and care activities is enabled. Different forms and practices of educational cooperation are planned together with the guardians.

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The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is an independent, national evaluation agency responsible for the external evaluations of education from early childhood education to higher education in Finland. It implements system and thematic evaluations, learning outcome evaluations and field-specific evaluations. Moreover, FINEEC supports providers of education and training and higher education institutions in matters related to evaluation and quality assurance, as well as advances the evaluation of education.

The document 'Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care' was produced as part of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre FINEEC's task of developing the evaluation of Finnish ECEC. It lays the foundation for the evaluation of the structure and content of ECEC both at the national and the local level.

The purpose of the document is to support ECEC organisers and private service providers in carrying out systematic and goal-oriented self-evaluation associated with quality management and to provide tools for evaluating the structure and content of early childhood education and care. The document contains a review of research on the constituting elements of quality in early childhood education and care and presents indicators for the quality of early childhood education and care in Finland created on the basis of this research.

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