

Internal evaluation policies for preschools in Italy, Korea, and New Zealand. Challenges and opportunities for scalability to a national level

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Access to quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a policy lever for countries to tackle early inequalities, reduce socioeconomic disparities and improve children's life outcomes. Therefore, monitoring ECEC quality is increasing worldwide (EU Commission, 2014; Melhuish, 2011; OECD, 2011; 2015). Yet, quality is multidimensional and its monitoring poses challenges. Among these: diversity of provision within countries; purposes and consequences of quality monitoring; definition of quality and standards setting; consensus around evaluation procedures and evaluation capacity (OECD, 2015).

In Italy, the recently integrated ECEC system received increased policy attention and preschool evaluation has been tested in an experimentation carried out in 2018-2020 (Freddano & Stringher, 2021; Previtali & Stringher, 2017). Since 2015, school internal evaluation in Italy is mandatory for all primary and secondary schools, according to Presidential decree 80/2013 establishing the National Evaluation System. The resulting improvement three-year cycle includes four phases: a) school internal evaluation; b) external evaluation; c) improvement plan; d) social accountability. During the preschool experimentation, a self-evaluation format (P-SEF) has been tried out for the first time in Italian preschools.

Despite the positive reception of the P-SEF among Italian preschools, critical policy questions arise on the scalability of internal evaluation to all preschools nationally. The core issue is how to introduce preschool evaluation on a national level, given that preschool settings are so diverse. More specific questions include: how to harmonize preschool evaluation in comprehensive institutes, where an evaluation format already exists for primary and lower secondary levels? Should internal evaluation procedures differ for different preschools (i.e., lighter in smaller preschools and more thorough in bigger ones)? How to ensure that quality is understood in different kinds of preschools (state, municipal, private publicly subsidized)?

A literature review has been undertaken and found limited evidence on scaling up preschool monitoring at a national level (Race to the top, 2016). Although monitoring quality is common internationally, national quality evaluation in ECEC is undertaken in relatively few countries and, according to the OECD (2015), internal evaluation is generally carried out based on tools that ECEC services can freely choose from.

Therefore, answers to the questions posed by the Italian self-evaluation experimentation remain open.

This is why an online qualitative peer learning activity (PLA) has been initiated with representatives from countries with extensive experience in preschool quality monitoring: Korea and New Zealand. The purpose of the PLA is to share key challenges in scaling up preschool internal evaluation, through an analysis of purposes, definitions, indicators, procedures and tools, results, and challenges in the three countries, and to draw implications for policy and practice.

Although analyses are still ongoing, preliminary results show that in Korea, internal evaluation (as part of childcare accreditation) and kindergarten evaluation started respectively in 2005 and 2008 and has become the major evaluation mode for kindergartens since 2020. This shift was initiated to reflect demands from kindergartens and to advocate teachers' autonomy and sustainability in enhancing quality of services (Ministry of Education, Korea, 2020). Newly initiated internal evaluation varies among 17 local offices of education and is typically conducted by a self-evaluation committee consisting of a director, teachers, parent representatives in each kindergarten, focusing on following areas: 1) curriculum implementation; 2) educational environment and management, 3) personnel training; and 4) health and safety. However, due to a split ECEC system in Korea, childcare centers (serving children from 0 to 5) and kindergartens (for children 3 to 5) have different sets of indicators and evaluation procedures. As of January 2023, the Korean government announced a plan to consolidate the ECEC system under the Ministry of Education to harmonize quality across different early childhood settings. Accordingly, it is expected to consolidate the quality monitoring systems, resolving issues including quality indicators, modes, procedures, and frequencies of evaluation.

In New Zealand internal evaluation has been a requirement of licensed early childhood education and care services since 1996. Changing terminology and limited understanding of, and capability to do and use evaluation for improvement, have contributed to the ongoing challenges faced in integrating internal and external evaluation at scale, and indicators are central to both for quality improvement. The Education Review Office (ERO) has developed a suite of shared resources for external and internal evaluation. Baseline data about the quality of education has been analysed for 2021/22 and next year improvement shifts will be analyzed. The Early Learning Action Plan 2019-2029 includes an action to support services to undertake robust internal evaluation that strengthens implementation of preschool national curriculum, Te Whāriki, and ensures ongoing improvement.

Ongoing analyses include a comparison of indicators, governance and practices used in the three countries for quality monitoring. Overall, internal evaluation elicits active participation from ECEC services and they are likely to have more ownership in improving service quality compared to external evaluation. On the other hand, scaling

preschool internal evaluation to system level raises challenges associated with building shared understandings and capability to do and use evaluation for improvement. It requires capacity building in evaluation and focusing on the use of evaluation data at all levels of the ECEC system. Such opportunities and challenges will be discussed for their implications on policy, research, and practice.

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