

https://doi.org/10.1590/1980531410206_en

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CONTEXT EVALUATION: INSTRUMENTS, METHODS, RESULTS, AND USES

 Eliana Maria Bahia Bhering^I

 Translated by: Fernando Effori de Mello^{II}

^I Fundação Carlos Chagas (FCC), São Paulo (SP), Brazil; ebhering@fcc.org.br

^{II} Freelancer, São Paulo (SP), Brazil; feffori@gmail.com

Abstract

The article analyzes the different possibilities of evaluating the context of early childhood education (ECE) in Brazil with regard to evaluation goals, methods, instruments, and results. It also stresses the need for approaches combining both external and self-evaluation, with a view to promoting debates in the field. It presents Brazilian studies from all regions of the country that indicate, through external evaluation, low service quality, as a means to argue for the importance of evaluation work. The article points out the need to generate more data and knowledge that can contribute to improving ECE quality. Such data and knowledge may inform and involve all: researchers, managers, pedagogical teams, and the school community.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION • EDUCATION EVALUATION • EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS •
EVALUATION METHODS

AVALIAÇÃO DE CONTEXTO DA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL: INSTRUMENTOS, MÉTODOS, RESULTADOS E USOS

Resumo

O artigo pretende analisar as diferentes possibilidades de avaliação de contexto da educação infantil (EI) no Brasil, no que tange aos objetivos, métodos, instrumentos e resultados, defende a necessidade de propostas que articulem avaliações externas e a autoavaliação, e intenciona promover debates no campo. Apresenta pesquisas brasileiras realizadas em todas as regiões do país, as quais, por meio de avaliações externas, sinalizam a baixa qualidade do atendimento, como forma de argumentar sobre a importância do trabalho de avaliação. O artigo aponta a necessidade da geração de mais dados e conhecimento que contribuam para a melhoria da qualidade da EI. Tais dados e conhecimento poderão informar e envolver todos: pesquisadores, gestores, equipes pedagógicas e comunidade escolar.

EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL • AVALIAÇÃO DA EDUCAÇÃO • INSTRUMENTOS DE AVALIAÇÃO •
MÉTODOS DE AVALIAÇÃO

EVALUACIÓN DEL CONTEXTO DE LA EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL: INSTRUMENTOS, MÉTODOS, RESULTADOS Y USOS

Resumen

El artículo pretende analizar las diferentes posibilidades de evaluación del contexto de la educación infantil (EI) en Brasil, en cuanto a objetivos, métodos, instrumentos y resultados, defiende la necesidad de propuestas que articulen evaluaciones externas y la autoevaluación, y pretende promover debates en el campo. Presenta investigaciones brasileñas realizadas en todas las regiones del país, que, a través de evaluaciones externas, señalan la baja calidad de la atención, como una forma de argumentar sobre la importancia del trabajo de evaluación. El artículo resalta la necesidad de generar más datos y conocimientos que contribuyan para mejorar la calidad de la EI. Estos datos y conocimientos podrán informar e involucrar a todos: investigadores, directivos, equipos pedagógicos y la comunidad escolar.

EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL • EVALUACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN • INSTRUMENTOS DE EVALUACIÓN • MÉTODOS DE EVALUACIÓN

L'ÉVALUATION DE CONTEXTE DANS L'ÉDUCATION DE LA PETITE ENFANCE: OUTILS, METHODES, RESULTATS ET UTILISATIONS

Résumé

Cet article vise à analyser les différentes possibilités d'évaluation de contexte dans le domaine de l'éducation de la petite enfance au Brésil, en termes d'objectifs, de méthodes, d'outils et de résultats. Il soutient que des propositions qui articulent évaluations externes et auto-évaluation sont nécessaires et entend promouvoir les débats dans ce domaine. Il présente des recherches brésiliennes, menées dans toutes les régions du pays, qui, par le biais d'évaluations externes, mettent en évidence la faible qualité des services en question, justifiant ainsi l'importance du travail d'évaluation. L'article montre qu'il faudrait générer davantage de données et de connaissances pour contribuer à améliorer la qualité de l'éducation de la petite enfance. En effet, ces dernières pourraient contribuer à informer et à impliquer tous: les chercheurs, gestionnaires, équipes enseignantes, ainsi que la communauté scolaire dans son ensemble.

ÉDUCATION DE LA PETITE ENFANCE • ÉVALUATION PÉDAGOGIQUE • INSTRUMENTS D'ÉVALUATION • MÉTHODES D'ÉVALUATION

Received on: APRIL 6, 2023 | Approved for publication on: JULY 18, 2024



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BRAZILIAN POLICY FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (EI, FROM THE PORTUGUESE, *educação infantil*), though respecting socioeconomic and cultural peculiarities, seems aligned with the international concern for the right of young children and their families. In its Goal 7, the Plano Nacional da Educação [National Education Plan] 2014-2024 deals with basic education quality and emphasizes that it is necessary to “Promote the quality of basic education in all its stages and modalities” (Ministério da Educação [MEC], 2014, own translation). It is an ECE goal to ensure quality activities and experiences through curriculum approaches with playing and interacting as core areas. Other requirements are qualified professionals for healthy interaction with the children and actions for their safety, protection, and health that are also endowed with pedagogical intentionality. Time and space organization, the selection of materials, toys, and equipment suitable for the age groups, as well as well-founded pedagogical practices, collaborate to ensure the rights of babies and children.

This article presents Brazil’s position on ECE context evaluation, a position that advocates reflective evaluation based on scripts that guide discussions at educational units with the school community, clarifying constitutive issues of evaluation and Brazilian ECE. The article differentiates evaluation types, the instruments that are available in Brazil, the methods with which an evaluation can be carried out, and their scope. Both self-evaluation and external evaluation instruments are built by teams of experts relying on national and international literature and on national documentation and guidelines. ECE evaluation through instruments based on research results, which are informed by psychometrics, validated for use with representative samples or in a census-based manner, requires procedures different from those elaborated and implemented for reflective evaluation, referred to here as self-evaluation. Thus, instruments’ nature, scope, and way of application must be differentiated.

In Brazil, translations of foreign instruments are available, such as the Italian ones *Indicatori e Scala della Qualità Educativa del Nido (ISQUEN)* and *Autovalutazione della Scuola dell’Infanzia (AVSI)*, which have inspired Brazilian self-evaluation instruments, and the American ones *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ITERS-3)* and *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)* – tested and used in many countries, translated into several languages, and extensively used in national and international research. There is an instrument that was created in 2017 by an international group of experts – *Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO)*. In Brazil, the part of this instrument that deals with context was entitled *Escala de Avaliação de Ambientes de Aprendizagens dedicados à Primeira Infância [Evaluation Scale for Learning Environments Dedicated to Early Childhood] (EAPI)* and was translated by *Fundação Maria Cecília Souto Vidigal [Maria Cecília Souto Vidigal Foundation] (FMCSV)* in partnership with *Laboratório de Estudos e Pesquisas em Economia Social [Laboratory of Studies and Research in Social Economy] (LEPES)* at the *Faculdade de Economia, Administração e Contabilidade de Ribeirão Preto da Universidade de São Paulo [University of São Paulo’s School of Economics, Administration, and Accounting in Ribeirão Preto] (FEA-RP/USP)* (Ferreira et al., 2021). It is an adapted and expanded version of the observation and interview instruments. There are two self-evaluation instruments in Brazil, one published by the *Ministério da Educação [Ministry of Education] (MEC)* and another by *Secretaria Municipal de Educação de São Paulo [São Paulo Municipal Education Department] (SME/SP)*, respectively: the *Indicadores da qualidade na educação infantil [National early childhood education quality indicators] (MEC, 2009)* and the

Indicadores de qualidade da educação infantil paulistana [São Paulo early childhood education quality indicators] (Secretaria Municipal de Educação de São Paulo [SME/SP], 2016).

Other municipalities have been working on building their own instruments for both self-evaluation – e.g., Salvador (Secretaria Municipal de Educação de Salvador, 2016) – and external evaluation (Pimenta, 2017, 2020). In addition, the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira] (Inep) has been implementing the Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Básica da EI [National Basic Education Evaluation System for ECE] (Saeb-EI) since 2019, which comprises various questionnaires to be answered by municipal secretaries and ECE unit principals and teachers (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [Inep], 2021). Like ITERS-3 and ECERS-3, which can also be applied on a large scale in units, these instruments are widely tested, reviewed, and validated, which ensures their reliability. All of the instruments above were built by teams of experts, with specific objectives and have undergone different review and implementation processes.

There are many policy and practice evaluation and monitoring instruments in several countries, also with different objectives. For example, there are national evaluation instruments (such as that of the Australian government, which is used for both external and self-evaluation); some instruments are widely used in research and were not meant for use as national evaluation instruments (such as CLASS¹ in the U.S.); there are also instruments that build on specific approaches, such as High-Scope, in the U.S. The latter has context evaluation instruments – Classroom Coach: Improving Preschool Classroom Quality, Infant and Toddler and Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA), and COR – to monitor children at the institution level; there are also the Italian ISQUEN and AVSI, published in Brazil.

There are three ways to conduct evaluations: through self-evaluation, by a group who intends to reflect on its own work over time; through external evaluation, which uses an external perspective, guided by instruments that are theoretically and scientifically validated, to find information that describes certain characteristics and profiles of educational units; and through internal evaluation, which helps to maintain an external perspective on what the institution or system does and is carried out by internal agents. Additionally, there is monitoring that follows the evolution of policy, results, and educational-pedagogical practices over time. This strategy seeks to record the evolution of service in order to monitor how certain aspects behave. It therefore requires building indicators (for efficiency, effectiveness, quality, etc.), measure units that must have clear and objective definitions, avoiding interpretations and biases. The indicators should be represented by mathematical models and possess a defined periodicity and an explicit collection method (Jannuzzi, 2017).

As seen above, there are different approaches to context evaluation that seek specific information, producing qualitative and/or quantitative data. To that end, they may combine several ways of evaluating educational phenomena, using tools such as observation scales, questionnaires, interviews, discussion scripts with questions or statements, as with focus groups, etc.

Thus, and due to the complexity of the ECE context evaluation process, it is important to clarify some procedures for building instruments and conducting evaluation, and to contextualize their relevance to specific realities and objectives. This article intends to contribute to explaining the

1 Classroom Assessment Scoring System.

evaluation types and their methods, and it presents results of research of ECE external evaluations carried out in Brazil in the last 13 years.

Context evaluation: Around the instruments

The concept of context that is used in ECE is very important to define the evaluation types at this stage of basic education. Therefore, we highlight the conception presented by Bondioli (2014), used in national documents (MEC, 2009), according to which context consists of concrete elements (people, furniture, materials) and symbolic relationships, in a dynamic and reciprocal way. The author argues that coherently choosing a self-evaluation instrument should take into account the reality to be evaluated and the principle of negotiation; she also emphasizes that the evaluation process should be based on the pedagogical approach. Her perspective builds on an ECE approach developed in Italy, and it is worth emphasizing that the author refers to the unit's environment, characteristics, processes, and project.

However, the ECE context comprises several levels: the policies, which define the service modes (Lei n. 9.394, 1996); the norms on initial teacher education, which define the theoretical-practical framework of undergraduate pedagogy and licensure programs; the continuing education of teaching staff, the Base Nacional Comum para a Formação Continuada [National Common Teacher Education Base] (BNC – Formação Continuada) (Resolução n. 2, 2019), which also contains provisions on the Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Formação Continuada de Professores da Educação Básica [National Curriculum Guidelines on Continuing Teacher Education for Basic Education Teachers] (Resolução CNE/CP n. 1, 2020); the Diretrizes Curriculares [Curriculum Guidelines] (Resolução n. 5, 2009), which set the principles and conceptions underpinning the pedagogical work with children; and policy implementation in organizing institutional teams, as well as units' pedagogical work, classrooms, and children, according to the Base Nacional Comum Curricular [National Common Curriculum Base] (BNCC) (MEC, 2017). This set of documents delimits the offer conditions, that is, the ECE context is defined by this chain which involves legislation, guidelines, infrastructure, professional training, and pedagogical plans. EI context evaluation should encompass all these aspects, monitoring policies and the quality of practices.

From this perspective, the literature on educational evaluation considers three important aspects for ECE: children's *access* to vacancies; the *inputs* that characterize the supply conditions, which in turn imply several levels of evaluation (funding, human resources, facilities infrastructure, material and pedagogical resources, and compliance with legislation); and *processes*, encompassing the way in which adults and children are organized for the pedagogical process, i.e., how the educational plan is implemented. From the perspective of educational evaluation, context includes aspects that structure the policy and pedagogical practices carried out in the units. Of these, it is common for processes to be the most controversial ECE dimension, not only because of their theoretical-practical complexity, but also because of the research methodology that is chosen. As an evaluation focuses on professionals' and children's actions, it may take on different emphases depending on the evaluation and monitoring approaches, which can be complementary and participatory. In addressing the issues related to university reforms and the plans for participatory institutional evaluation, Leite (2005) sheds light on the discussion on educational evaluation types, arguing that processes: (1) require awareness, agreement, negotiation, and persuasion; (2) are epistemological instruments for thought and political action in the public sphere; (3) include the

creation of interpretive communities guided by the common good (a sense of belonging), with actors who view themselves from a relational perspective, in the interplay between knowledge, powers, and duties; (4) are exercised through co-management and self-government; (5) institute autonomy for individuals, collectives, and the organization; (6) are nurtured by permanent self-legislation, self-criticism, and self-monitoring; (7) require their own time. The combination of processes requires a fresh look at external large-scale evaluation, which seems to involve actions that are disconnected from the public to be evaluated, and efforts must be made towards understanding what the evaluations together can produce for all those involved.

Table 1 presents some characteristics of the various forms of evaluation and their focuses, considering the principles of participatory institutional evaluation of ECE and collective construction of the evaluation policy in question.

Table 1
Participatory institutional and child evaluations

	Participatory institutional evaluation			Child evaluation
Type	Self-evaluation	Internal and external evaluation	Children monitoring	Internal and/or external evaluation
Conducted by	Pedagogical team (guided or not by internal or external tutors)	Professionals external to the unit/room, system, or body trained in using the instrument	Team of teachers and adults responsible for the class/classroom	Team of researchers, including or not the teachers or adults responsible for the classroom
General goal	Training, structuring pedagogical work, improvements	Management and/or system institutional tool	Monitoring development and learning	Identifying learning processes
Questions	How are pedagogical processes and planning created and developed at the institution?	What is the system's profile? What are the common and unusual practices? What are the group's weaknesses and potentials?	How do children participate in the processes offered? What are the learning records?	What do children learn over their ECE years? What seems to be more significant?
Content	Pedagogical processes: planning, practices, observation of children, relationships	Dimensions: access, inputs, pedagogical processes	Performance: the child's participation throughout their school trajectory	Development and school learning processes
Methodology	Instrument is structured by themes and aspects selected for discussion	Instrument is theoretically and scientifically validated (observation scales, questionnaires)	Descriptive analysis scripts	Validated instrument
Sample	Voluntary; as a training action	Census-based or sample-based	Census-based	Sample-based
Collection	Meetings with or without tutors, frequency determined by the institutional team	Usually face-to-face, frequency determined by the team	By teachers and supervisors, frequency determined by school management or system	By social and scientific demand, direct contact with children, validated instruments
Units of analysis	Aspects of management and practices	Access, inputs, and processes indicators and variables	Aspects of development and learning	Child development variables (cognitive, socio-emotional aspects)

(To be continued)

(Continuation)

	Participatory institutional evaluation			Child evaluation
Conduct of analysis	Collective and participatory	School community members, researchers, formative and participatory	Teaching staff	Researchers
Results	Discussions focused on pedagogical work organization, demands, and changes; and records and creation of action plans	Municipal department/school reports: descriptive analyses, relationships between variables; considerations and suggestions for changes; identifying priorities; implications for policies, practices	Description of children's trajectory, learning, and relationships through reports Target audience: teachers, school units, and families	Reports, articles/ chapters containing results analysis and political and practical guidelines
Common question	What are the conditions for all children to have their rights guaranteed by ECE?			

The evaluation types can help develop ECE quality, and are complementary and necessary for training actions, democratic management, and relations with the community. Careful analysis is recommended in selecting and building instruments for each evaluation type. The evaluation process should be shared, engaging the school segments involved in the Pedagogical Plan. For the evaluation to be formative, the instruments and results must be accessible to the public they are intended to.

Source: Author's elaboration.

Sordi (2022), when presenting the Participatory Institutional Evaluation model for the municipality of Campinas, emphasizes that it is supported by quality principles negotiated between schools and public authorities and by the supportive participation of all segments involved with the school unit. Mendes et al. (2015, as cited in Sordi, 2022, p. 32, own translation) also explain that “the advocated participation consists in promoting dialogue between the actors at various system levels, considering paid pedagogical time, spaces, and autonomy (both pedagogical and financial)”. The evaluation policy for primary education and youth and adults education (EJA, in Portuguese) at the municipal level (Resolução n. 5, 2009) establishes an internal evaluation committee (CPA, in Portuguese), whose tasks include dialogue with external evaluation processes. In the field of ECE, Bondioli (2014) proposes something similar regarding the definition of the concept and principles of quality.

With regard to methodology, Table 1 presents the various evaluation possibilities and scope and shows that it can be seen as a set of institutional evaluation strategies founded on democratic and participatory principles. The participatory institutional evaluation carried out by the teams from the educational unit should include both self-evaluation and child evaluation processes, usually called the *Relatório de acompanhamento da criança* [Child monitoring report], in compliance with the legislation that determines this as a task of teaching staff (MEC, 2009). System evaluation, a possible form of participatory institutional evaluation, refers to evaluations that seek data to inform policy, practice, and continuing education actions and may also address access, input, and process issues. Child evaluation refers to studies and research that provide insights into the trajectory of each child in terms of their development and learning, not necessarily as a child performance evaluation policy.

While instruments should be chosen based on discussions with school segments, it is important to analyze evaluation instruments' ability to measure staff perceptions and, on the other hand, educational processes. An instrument intended to evaluate the various aspects of the ECE context should follow design, testing, and validation steps in a scientific and systematic way

(Pasquali, 2013), which gives the instrument legitimacy to evaluate phenomena such as pedagogical practices and staff perceptions about their own work. Thus, there is a difference between validated instruments intended to measure phenomena through quantitative evaluation research and instruments built for specific self-evaluation purposes, such as those developed to discuss and monitor the implementation of an education unit's pedagogical plan, with the school community participating in discussion and reflection processes. Any context evaluation instruments, be they psychometrically validated or not, can be used in professional training actions.

Thus, Table 2 presents the scope of the instruments that are available in Brazil.

Table 2
Instruments

Instruments	Scope	Usage formats	Modes of collection	Adaptation	Uses	Data
ITERS-R and ITERS-3 (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2007; Harms, Cryer, Clifford & Yazejian, 2020)	International	External, internal, and self-evaluation	Observation	Only by psychometric procedures and with authorization	Research, system evaluations, and training actions	Quantitative
ECERS-R and ECERS-3 (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005, 2020)	International	External, internal, and self-evaluation	Observation	Only by psychometric procedures and with authorization	Research, system evaluations, and training actions	Quantitative
EAPI (Ferreira et al., 2021)	National (MELE ² adaptation)	External, internal, and self-evaluation	Interviews and observation	Subject to adaptation with the indicated authorizations and procedures	Research, system evaluations, and training actions	Quantitative
Indicadores da qualidade na educação infantil (MEC, 2009)	National	Self-evaluation	Forums with the school community	Subject to adaptation and review through discussions between experts	Research, training actions	Qualitative
Indicadores de qualidade da educação infantil paulistana (SME/SP, 2016)	Municipal	Self-evaluation	Forums with the school community	Subject to adaptation and review through discussions between experts	Research, training actions	Qualitative
AVSI (Bondioli & Ferrari, 2008)	International	Self-evaluation	Meetings with unit teams, debates, reflections	Subject to adaptation and review through discussions between experts	Research, staff training actions	Qualitative
ISQUEN (Becchi et al., 1999)	International	Self-evaluation	Meetings with unit teams, debates, reflections	Subject to adaptation and review through discussions between experts	Research, staff training actions	Qualitative

Source: Author's elaboration.

2 Early Learning Environments (one of the instruments of MELQO, 2017).

During the process experienced with members of the school community, self-evaluation instruments help school community members reflect on their actions and planning; additionally, they allow including topics related to what is proposed in the instruments. Because results for the national and São Paulo indicators are recorded by the participants through a color system (green, yellow, and red), it is possible to conduct studies describing the self-evaluation patterns. However, the descriptors/indicators forming these instruments' dimensions are often generic, but at times they can be more focused and objective. Still, in both cases, when used across many school units, they may lead teams to read, interpret, and understand the indicators differently, driving a view focused only on their own reality.

The teams' reflection and discussion processes may address aspects that escape the scope of analyses focused on describing a particular situation based on variables. For example, indicator 5.1 of the *Indicadores da qualidade na educação infantil* [Early childhood education quality indicators] is described as follows: "spaces and furniture that promote children's experiences" (MEC, 2009, p. 33, own translation). "Spaces and furniture" can vary greatly between units, and whether they "promote children's experiences" is something that should be evaluated based on the unit's specific initiative. Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint the characteristics of the spaces and furniture that the indicator is referring to; and the phrase "promote children's experiences" can be interpreted in various ways. Despite this limitation, the information is useful for participants in the self-evaluation, reflection, and analysis process, helping to direct attention to necessary improvements, which shows the instrument's formative nature.

On the other hand, instruments designed for the external evaluation of different contexts require greater objectivity and focus both in their design and application processes. User training should be organized to ensure they fully understand the concepts used in its composition and know how to seek the necessary information. Besides ensuring the study and thorough understanding of dimensions, items, and descriptors, evaluator reliability must also be checked, that is, whether evaluators mark the observed phenomenon coherently. This ensures that the instrument is being used correctly and demonstrates that it is well-calibrated and conceptually sound, and that the results are reliable, especially when used to evaluate large sample groups by a large number of field researchers.

This being the case – the use of foreign instruments selected for the evaluation procedure – an adaptation should involve psychometric procedures. Importantly, using only parts of the instruments should be avoided to maintain internal consistency, that is, the extent to which the total scale and the subscales measure common concepts (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2020, p. 11). In addition, an instrument should not be translated or adapted to specific realities without its authors' permission.

Considering instruments' different scope and goals, they should not in principle be compared. However, a qualitative content analysis can be conducted, starting from each instrument's underpinning concepts towards identifying the theoretical decisions made to address similar phenomena. Guerres-Zucco et al. (2022) present an analysis of eleven instruments, of which only five are published or freely accessible in Portuguese; it provides an overview of some of their specificities and scope. However, the authors do not mention that instruments such as ITERS-R

and its version 3 and ECERS-R and its version 3, or the Australian instrument (NQS),³ have been used in self-evaluation processes as well. The two versions of ITERS and ECERS (version R and version 3) are being used, at their authors' and users' suggestion, by educational units in self-evaluation processes, in preparation for and to understand external evaluations, and in initial and continuing education actions, without restrictions for acquisition or use. Material containing training instructions is also available.

The Australian instrument is available to all units in that country, whether private or public, for internal use. Its intended use includes debates between evaluators and units on the external and self-evaluation results (Bhering et al., 2020). This dialogue has influenced not only the instrument review processes over the years but has also fostered discussions between the central evaluation body – Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2020) – and the education units. In addition, the instrument offers opportunities for internal discussion on educational and pedagogical practices (Bhering et al., 2020). Institution teams, through the results of their self-evaluation, have the right to question the results of the external evaluation by requesting reviews of their scores and measured quality level. It is worth noting that this instrument is used to evaluate all units in the country, which means that it was built with sensitivity to include all units that adopt the national curriculum or are inspired by educational approaches such as High-Scope, Waldorf, Montessori, and Italian approaches, project methodology, etc.

Instruments that generate quantitative data can be used in any evaluation format, while self-evaluation instruments should be carefully analyzed in psychometric terms before deciding to use them to generate results that can be generalized. This difference is crucial because thorough study and careful analysis can aid in understanding the tool construction and applicability processes, as well as conceptually understanding the educational phenomena that are considered critical for ECE quality and for instrument composition.

Table 3 presents the structure of the instruments that are accessible in Brazil and points out, through different colors, their similarities in terms of their dimensions.

3 *National Quality Standard.*

Table 3
Instruments accessible in Brazil and their dimensions

Instruments Dimensions	ITERS-R 0-2 years old and 6 months	ITERS-3 0-3 years old	ECERS-R 2.7-5 years old	ECERS-3 3-5 years old	EAPI 2-5 years old	National indicators	São Paulo indicators
Scripts	Observation and questions teachers	-	Observation and questions teachers	-	Observation and interviews principals teachers	Discussion	Discussion
1	Space and furniture	Space and furniture	Space and furniture	Space and furniture	Infrastructure	Institutional planning	Educational planning and management
2	Personal care routines	Personal care routines	Personal care routines	Personal care routines	Curriculum, interactions and pedagogical practices	Multiple experiences and languages	Participation, listening, and authorship of babies and children
3	Speaking and understanding	Language and books	Language and reasoning	Language	Team and management	Interactions	Multiple experiences and languages
4	Activities	Learning activities	Activities	Learning activities	Functional diversity	Health promotion	Interactions
5	Interaction	Interaction	Interaction	Interaction	Security	Spaces, materials and furniture	Ethnic-racial and gender relations
6	Program structure	Organization of times of the day	Program structure	Organization of times of the day	Power supply	Teacher and staff training and working conditions	Educational environments: times, spaces and materials
7	Parents and team	-	Parents and team	-	-	Cooperation and exchange with families and participation in the social protection network	Health and well-being promotion
8	-	-	-	-	-	-	Educators' training and working conditions
9	-	-	-	-	-	-	Socio-cultural protection network

Source: Author's elaboration.

Note: **red**: personal care; **purple**: space and furniture; **bluish gray**: planning and management; **green**: curriculum, activities; **brown**: interactions; **yellow**: teams, training, working conditions; **mustard**: diversity; **pink**: families, protection network.

The Italian instruments are structured differently. ISQUEN – created by Becchi et al. in 1999 – consists of 51 descriptors distributed across four areas of interest: 1) subjects; 2) contexts and practices; 3) knowledge from doing; and 4) guarantees. Each of these areas has subareas. AVSI – created in 2001 by Bondioli and Ferrari (2008) – comprises 91 descriptors organized into four areas of interest: 1) educational experience; 2) professional activities; 3) adults and their relationships; and 4) guarantees. Each instrument uses a different scoring system. Each item of the ISQUEN scale has three non-exclusive conditions, and observation can determine which relate to the evaluated context. AVSI is constituted as an item-based instrument tiered into nine levels of quality, with descriptions in five of the nine levels (1, 3, 5, 7, 9), and scores can pertain to that sequence or to the intermediate one (2, 4, 6, 8) (Bhering et al., 2021).

The ECE teacher questionnaire from the Saeb-EI consists of the following dimensions: general information, training, professional experience and working conditions, class and classroom characterization, and teaching materials and resources (toys, books, and arts, mathematics, and music materials). Items in the *pedagogical resources* dimension are evaluated on a four-point Likert scale, and some questions address the *processes* dimension of the evaluation tripod, referring to children's autonomy when using the resources, especially books. The principals' questionnaire has the following dimensions: school general characterization, personal information, and working conditions, resources, and infrastructure, as well as management and participation. A predominance of the *input* dimension is seen in both instruments.

Brazilian research results: ECE context evaluation

In 2008, the MEC organized a research effort to understand the state of Brazilian ECE after 12 years of the Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional [National Education Guidelines and Framework Law] (LDB). This effort sought information about the services provided by public, private, and voluntary educational units in six Brazilian capitals and examined the impact of kindergarten on the results of Provinha Brasil on the performance of children aged 7 to 8 years. The Fundação Carlos Chagas [Carlos Chagas Foundation] (FCC) was selected and partnered with the MEC and the Inter-American Development Bank (BID, in Portuguese) to develop the study *Educação Infantil no Brasil: Avaliação qualitativa e quantitativa* [EI in Brazil: A qualitative and quantitative evaluation]. The sample defined in the bid notice comprised: Belém (PA), Fortaleza (CE), Teresina (PI), Campo Grande (MS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), and Florianópolis (SC). One of the various challenges facing the study was choosing the quality evaluation instrument, considering the Brazilian reality.

The team sought national instruments that were available, validated, and reliable. However, there were no Brazilian instruments at the time that met the required criteria, so international instruments were then sought. The FCC research team analyzed Brazilian literature and documents that might inform the analysis of the instruments to be considered. Campos et al. (2010, p. 55, own translation) indicated that:

The processes of choosing and adapting the observation scripts required special attention from the team, as they needed to meet several criteria: being consistent with the national official documents, containing curriculum guidelines and quality parameters for daycare centers and kindergartens; being sufficiently detailed to allow a service quality evaluation that might cover a wide range of aspects, including the main dimensions of early childhood education quality identified in the literature; and allowing adaptation to the research goals within the given schedule.

Among the analyzed instruments, ITERS-R and ECERS-R were included because their dimensions covered important aspects of Brazilian ECE; they had a play and interaction-based approach; they were used in many countries, which certified their reliability, validity, and sensitivity to cultural variations; theoretical and practical training was provided for use in large-scale research; and their translations had been tested and studied in Brazil. While scientifically founded, this choice caused discomfort in the ECE field, as this was a new research initiative in the country. There were concerns not only that results would not actually portray the Brazilian scenario and might drive an evaluation not consistent with the national plans, but also that the generated information might be misused. The analyses did not confirm the non-representation concerns and contributed to new debates on the possible paths and positions that would guide researchers and education professionals in Brazil.

Subsequent research confirms the need to deepen knowledge regarding ECE context quality at the municipal level, as the lack of data did not allow sufficient understanding of the service. In addition, it was not possible to determine whether services met the *Parâmetros nacionais de qualidade para a educação infantil* [Early childhood education national quality parameters] (MEC, 2006) and whether children's fundamental rights were being guaranteed according to Brazilian legislation. The initiative strongly influenced the course of this discussion. Important positions defined the boundaries of debate, the form and content of procedures that could potentially impact the full development of service for children aged 0 to 5 years in the first stage of basic education (MEC, 2012, 2015).

Studies on ECE context quality have been developed over the last 13 years. They all provided feedback to the municipal systems involved, presenting their results and enabling debates. In addition, the research and evaluations included members of research groups, academics, and municipal department staff who conducted the external evaluation of the educational units. This partnership allowed a rich and powerful dialogue between teams on evaluation, quality, improvements, and forms of analyzing and using results. Table 4 presents the studies' information about its instruments, sample and reports.

Table 4
Brazilian research

Study	Instrument	Sample	Output
6 municipalities MEC/BID/FCC (2009-2010)	ITERS-R and ECERS-R	147 public, private, and philanthropic units	Research report and scientific articles
Southeast capital (2012-2013 – FCC)	ITERS-R and ECERS-R	149 public units (random sample)	Research report
South capital (2015-2016 – FCC)	ITERS-R and ECERS-R	87 public units (census-based)	Research report
Southeast capital 2 (2019-2020 – FMCSV)	EAPI (adapted to São Paulo context)	65 public units (random sample)	Research report
Southeast capital 2 (2019 – FCC)	ITERS-3 and ECERS-3	5 partner units	Research report
12 municipalities (FMCSV, LEPES/USP/RP – 2022)	EAPI (adapted and expanded Brazil)	Public units	Research report, results publication

Source: Cipriano et al. (2022), Campos et al. (2010, 2011), Bhering et al. (2013, 2020), Bhering and Abuchaim (2016).

MEC/BID/FCC study

Results – ITERS-R and ECERS-R

The results were presented in a particular fashion, because the ITERS-R and ECERS-R scores originally range from 1 to 7, distributed across four quality levels (1, 3, 5 and 7). Because the team considered that a 1-10 scale distributed in five quality levels would facilitate understanding by the Brazilian public, they adapted the score. Table 5 shows the categories and scores used by the MEC/BID/FCC survey and the categories and respective scores employed by the original scales – ITERS-R and ECERS-R.

Table 5
Scores used – MEC/BID/FCC and ITERS-R and ECERS-R

MEC/BID/FCC		ITERS-R and ECERS-R	
Categories	Score	Categories	Score
Inadequate	1 I-----3	Inadequate	1 I-----2.9
Basic	3 I-----5	Minimum	3 I-----4.9
Adequate	5 I-----7	X	X
Good	7 I-----8.5	Good	5 I-----6.9
Excellent	8.5 I-----10	Excellent	7

Source: Campos et al. (2010, own translation).

Data collection was conducted by members of ECE research groups from the federal universities in each capital. These researchers were trained in using the instrument by the FCC dedicated team. Thus, data collection was performed by external observers. Table 6 shows the results for the six capitals.

Table 6
Number of units, classes, average scores

Municipalities	N. planned units	N. participant units	ITERS-R n. classes	Average ITERS-R score	ECERS-R n. classes	Average ECERS-R score
1	20	19	4	2.7	19	3.2
2	30	30	19	2.8	28	3.6
3	30	30	30	4.4	30	4.7
4	20	20	12	2.7	16	2.2
5	20	18	7	3.9	15	3.6
6	30	30	19	2.3	30	2.7
Total	150	147	91	3.3	138	3.4

Source: Campos et al. (2010, own translation).

The results show that the average scores varied from *Inadequate* to *Basic* for classes from 0 to 2.5 years old (ITERS-R), from 2 years and 7 months old to 5 years old (ECERS-R) and for kindergarten classes (ECERS-R). It is important to highlight that the ITERS-R scores for municipalities in the North, Central-West, and Northeast regions are lower, being classified as *Inadequate*; the scores for

the Southeast and South regions were classified as *Basic*. Such data is concerning both for local and research teams. In addition to the data, photographs taken by the field researchers illustrating the observed situations were also used, aiding in the interpretation of data and providing a better understanding of scores.

The results for classes of children from 2 years and 7 months old to 5 years old and for kindergarten classes, though slightly higher, also portrayed a different scenario between the regions: capitals in the Northeast were classified as *Inadequate*; those in the South, Southeast, and Central-West regions were still classified as *Basic*; and the North showed a slight improvement for this age group.

Campos et al. (2010, p. 394, own translation), when considering the quality of day care centers and kindergartens in the survey sample, comment that the analyses indicated that the average scores:

. . . do not correspond to adequate quality levels. By examining the averages in each of the subscales that make up these instruments, it was found that important aspects of a program aimed at children in these age groups are being neglected in most of the evaluated institutions.

South and Southeast regions studies

Both studies were conducted at the request of the municipal education departments and were coordinated by the FCC teams in capitals 3 and 5 of the MEC/BID/FCC study. Staff from the respective departments, federal universities, and private ECE institutions participated in the study; however, an external evaluation was also conducted. For capital 5, all districts were considered, and a size-proportional sample was selected. The study in capital 3 was census-based and included a service diagnosis goal as requested by the municipal education department. Table 7 shows the number of units, classes evaluated, and average scores.

Table 7

Southeast and South studies

Municipalities	Total n. units	ITERS-R n. classes	ITERS-R score	ECERS-R n. classes	ECERS-R score	Category
3	87	96	3.7	293	4.3	<i>Minimum</i>
5	150	45	3.0	116	2.9	<i>Minimum and Inadequate, respectively</i>

Source: Bhering et al. (2013), Bhering & Abuchaim (2016).

When comparing the results for the 2009 study with those for these two capitals, we can see that, from 2009 (when data was collected in the six capitals) to 2012 and 2015 (when data was collected in municipalities 5 and 3, respectively), no advances were found. In municipality 5, the scores remained in the *Minimum* category after 3 years, except for ECERS-R, which changed from *Inadequate* to *Minimum* in 2012. In municipality 3, the scores remained in the *Minimum* category after 6 years. This category indicates that the units possess some basic aspects and components that are important for providing quality service in day care centers and kindergartens. This means that, on the one hand, the children have daily (if limited) access to materials, toys, books, activities,

approaches, interactions, and personal care, and there is room for improvement, but, on the other hand, the pedagogical teams have difficulty leading and accepting approaches that focus on the child and their development and learning.

Melhuish and Gardiner (2019) conducted a longitudinal study in England with approximately six thousand children aged 3-4 years who attended private, public, and voluntary ECE units. The research goal was to investigate associations between infrastructure and process quality measures in the ECE units. By comparing the EPPE study's (Taggart et al., 2011; Sylva et al., 2010) ECERS-R measures with data from their 2019 study, the authors concluded that there had been an improvement in service quality for children aged 3-5 years in different public institutions. They explained that this may have been achieved because educational policies at the time listened carefully about the state of the service to small children in the late 1990s, taking the actions necessary to improve it.

The FMCSV/LEPES-USP/RP study

ECE quality evaluation: A post-BNCC portrait

The study *Avaliação da qualidade da educação infantil: Um retrato pós-BNCC* [Early childhood education quality evaluation: A post-BNCC portrait] was conducted by FMCSV and LEPES in 2021 and 2022. The initiative's guiding question was: To what extent were the quality parameters and criteria being implemented? According to the executive summary (Cipriano et al., 2022, p. 9, own translation), the "purpose was to obtain a picture of the current quality of ECE by understanding the stage of BNCC's implementation".

The sample consisted of twelve municipalities located in the five Brazilian regions: Porto Velho (RO), Boa Vista (RR), Fortaleza (CE), Sobral (CE), Recife (PE), Campo Grande (MS), Goiânia (GO), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Belo Horizonte (MG), Suzano (SP), Joinville (SC), and Porto Alegre (RS). Field researchers visited 3,467 classes, of which 1,683 were day care groups and 1,784 were kindergarten classes, at 1,807 educational units (Cipriano et al., 2022). The instrument used was the EAPI, semantically adapted to BNCC (MEC, 2017).

While the results were organized to present the 129 items from the observation script, 35 from the teacher interview script, and 18 from the principal interview script, this article considers only the results for the observation performed in day care center and kindergarten classrooms related to the curriculum, interactions, and pedagogical practices. The scores were presented as follows (Table 8):

Table 8
EAPI scores

EAPI results					
Category	Unacceptable	Inadequate	Regular	Good	Excellent
Score	0 - 0.99	1.0 - 1.49	1.5 - 1.99	2.0 - 2.49	2.5 - 3.0
Colors	Red	Orange	Yellow	Light green	Dark green

Source: Cipriano et al. (2022, p. 23, own translation).

It is worth noting that the study results were presented by class and by municipality, not by unit, and that the sample includes municipalities that participated in the studies presented in this article: Fortaleza, Campo Grande, and Rio de Janeiro.

Table 9
Observation results

Municipalities	Score	Category
1	1.36	Inadequate
2	1.60	Regular
3	1.67	Regular
4	1.83	Regular
5	1.67	Regular
6	1.91	Regular
7	1.88	Regular
8	1.37	Inadequate
9	1.69	Regular
10	1.85	Regular
11	1.40	Inadequate
12	1.63	Regular
National average	1.69	Regular

Source: Cipriano et al. (2022, p. 27, own translation).

According to Table 9, the results indicate that most municipalities have *Regular* quality ECE, while three capitals have *Inadequate* quality. The team concluded that:

. . . in general, Early Childhood Education in the sample . . . it can be seen as “regular”. According to the EAPI standard criteria, this means that children are being offered the minimum, but there is a need for actions so that what is recommended by Early Childhood Education official documents is satisfactorily implemented. Objectively, it means that children have access to infrastructure . . . that can serve them but does not generate experiences that increase their autonomy, that put them in central roles. For example, in the reference room there are pedagogical materials that are more basic – writing and arts utensils or a few books to be handled only by some children or the teacher – but there is no material that facilitates investigation or diverse storybooks and in a sufficient number for all children. (Cipriano et al., 2022, pp. 27-28, own translation).

Given these results, and although the national and municipal policies have plans that aim for all children to have access to quality day care (for families who want it) and kindergarten, we can propose the hypothesis that Brazil still has no quality results above the *Inadequate* or *Minimum* levels according to ITERS-R and ECERS-R, and *Inadequate* or *Regular* according to EAPI. It is possible to conclude that educational units, whether day care centers or kindergartens, do not achieve the policy goals established by the mandating documents regarding quality.

While this article does not intend to analyze in detail and compare the instruments used in quantitative research conducted in the country or the relationship between the results measured by different instruments, we can infer not only that Brazilian ECE needs urgent improvements, but also that, after 12 years, the service does not seem to have improved. After four years of BNCC

implementation (MEC, 2017), the quality of practices has not yet reached levels considered *Good* and/or *Excellent*.

Through self-evaluation, external evaluation, and monitoring carried out through combined methods, using guiding and/or validated instruments combined with actions, it is possible to identify aspects that should be considered and prioritized over time.

ECE service undoubtedly requires specific structure and involves very complex processes due to the specific needs of the age groups served, and therefore depends on a fluid and informed dialogue between various levels of policy and practice. Institutional evaluation enables this dialogue and fosters the constant reflection on how to solve provision and service problems.

Despite the few external evaluation studies conducted in Brazil, the results obtained cannot be ignored, nor can researchers not be encouraged to develop projects that continue to seek information on ECE quality in a representative way. While discussions occur about the selection of contents to be evaluated and the elaboration and selection of instruments, and while forms of evaluation are developed, it is also necessary to continually advance in search for data on educational and pedagogical opportunities in day care centers and kindergartens. Saeb-EI can bring major contributions regarding the structural conditions of service provision and staff and management perceptions; however, it still does not evaluate processes. Efforts must be aligned: how an external perspective can complement what self-evaluation points out, and how the latter responds to the results of external evaluations. The debate between the outputs of both evaluation types can contribute to public policy improvement, as well as to professional and institutional development regarding practices and management. Therefore, both types of evaluation contribute to improving the educational context of Brazilian babies and children.

Based on the results demonstrated in this article, a question can be posed as a provocation for new studies that may influence the understanding of the management and pedagogical teams about service quality: to guarantee the rights of children aged 0 to 5 years, what aspects should be considered in the implementation of quality educational plans?

The results presented here indicate how compromised the service has been over the years in Brazil, indicating, albeit briefly, that public policy does not seem to reach the population equally. While some units stand out, they do not represent the municipalities; and some municipalities in certain regions of the country reached only *Inadequate*, *Minimum*, or *Regular* levels, while others almost reached *Good*, but remain at lower levels.

Still, to underscore the need for further evaluation research, perhaps on external evaluation policies, it is necessary to acknowledge that these studies still do not provide us with a deeper analysis of the inequalities found in the country's different regions. They have only just begun to describe the situation of ECE today. Some municipalities and units stand out, but only timidly and inconsistently. This indicates that public policy is not reaching the population of babies and children equally, which should concern researchers and all those involved in the service provision, as well as influence teaching and management teams' initial and continuing education. On the other hand, few studies have yet been published about the self-evaluation processes guided by the *Indicadores da qualidade na educação infantil* organized by municipalities, about the results and the plans designed from using this tool, as well as the opportunities for dialogue with the school community.

And finally, the results for Saeb-EI 2021 reveal interesting data about teachers' position when it comes to providing information about their working conditions. Although the questions

are presented objectively, the answers seem to demonstrate a tendency to mark the alternatives that represent a desirable teaching practice. For example, most respond that their study practices are carried out “often” or “always”, or that the children can reach toys independently or have autonomy to explore toys. Both answers assume that the room is organized in such a way that there are toys, that they are accessible, and that children are allowed to explore the toys. Teachers’ responses in Saeb-EI contradict those in the national studies presented here. This trend concerns evaluators because it does not allow identifying the pedagogical practice that takes place throughout the country. Thus, the observation instruments used by external evaluators can highlight the services’ difficulties and weaknesses as well as their possibilities and potential.

Final considerations

The instruments selected to gather information about ECE, considering scientific methods, should align with the goals of the evaluation, i.e., this choice should be based on the instrument’s ability to respond to or achieve the pre-established goals. Evaluating ECE in representative samples, e.g., by investigating how the institutional contexts and their resources (inputs) are organized, or the pedagogical practice in relation to processes, presupposes selecting or designing instruments with careful consideration of the stages of their constitution and testing procedure. In other words, whether they are tested for reliability and validation. In any case, instruments for educational evaluation should be tested, unless the evaluation process is conducted reflexively, and over the process they may be changed and adjusted in order to capture participants’ positions more reliably.

No Brazilian instruments for evaluating ECE contexts have been published, except for the *Indicadores da qualidade na educação infantil* (MEC, 2009), whose methodology presupposes a collective discussion and reflection process based on statements regarding various aspects of institutional action. As said earlier, foreign instruments have been translated and published that can be applied for external evaluation and self-evaluation. Additionally, there are instruments inspired by the *Indicadores Nacionais* [National Indicators] and designed by municipal education departments for reflective processes.

Brazilian scientific production in the field of ECE context evaluation discusses the adequacy of foreign instruments for evaluating national contexts, the ways of conducting evaluations, and how results are used. In this respect, there is a misunderstanding about the contribution of external evaluations as regards the improvement of ECE contexts and especially as concerns teacher education processes. It is usually considered that external evaluations not only maintain a distant perspective on the complexity of ECE service, but also fail to promote a broad understanding of their results, making it more difficult to engage those involved. Thus, methods related to self-evaluation are advocated and preferred as they include the participation of school communities and consider the opinion of all members. Along the same vein is a justified defense of the importance of ECE in the lives of children and their families and, therefore, a struggle to maintain quality service (especially in day care centers).

Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the role of evaluations without losing sight of public policy goals and the need to obtain reliable information about ECE service. It is necessary to stress the importance of the various ways of looking at the same phenomenon and investigating the various aspects involved in performing quality work, thus guaranteeing what is unnegotiable. It is essential to examine whether what is contained in the mandating documents, built by various

hands and discussed in various forums, is actually reaching all children according to national expectations. Therefore, going beyond the theoretical debate about the ECE project means getting to the day care center and kindergarten floor in a scientific, ethical, and formative way in order to ensure quality education, providing learning for all children, in the national scenario. Finally, it is also necessary to clarify that, despite their informative potential, evaluations should not – in a country like Brazil, where inequality persists – be at the service of punitive or meritocratic measures and should not be carried out in a hierarchical manner (Sordi, 2022). On the contrary, evaluations must be at the service of pedagogical work evolution, staff training, structural change, the necessary adjustments to public service policy, and above all, the welfare of children, ensuring them their inalienable rights.

Evaluations support the development of educational and social service, strengthen the dialogue between the different public education levels (Sordi, 2022), and enable decision-making that takes into account all those involved. They should be questioned, reviewed, updated and, above all, informed about how their audience perceives their implementation, conduct, results, and directions. It is of interest that their audience understands them so that it incorporates them in a formative way into the daily dynamics of ECE work, with the sole purpose of organizing intentional environments towards the full and meaningful learning of Brazilian children. It is desirable that the different types of evaluation inform the various levels of public policy and have an impact on educational units' daily practices. It is necessary to know ECE at the national, state, and municipal level, so that measures are taken to improve quality based on the various Brazilian scenarios.

The step forward in approaching ECE context evaluation would be to collectively define how the municipal ECE plan can be evaluated in its political, theoretical, and practical dimensions, how the instruments should be constituted for evaluations, who should lead the self-evaluation and large-scale external evaluation processes, and how the results will be analyzed and put into perspective by units, both individually and collectively. Thinking about the school should be done from various perspectives, from different places, such as the school community, municipal systems, and researchers. According to Bondioli's (2004) arguments, this attitude reaffirms the negotiated quality pact, without excluding what has become non-negotiable for the country.

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Data availability statement

The data underlying the research text is reported in the article.

How to cite this article

Bhering, E. M. B. (2024). Early childhood education context evaluation: Instruments, methods, results, and uses. *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, 54, Article e10206.
https://doi.org/10.1590/1980531410206_en