

Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper

principle ⑧

Valuing the work:
a 0-6 profession and
parity with school
teachers



This dossier is elaborating on one of the principles in the *Children in Europe* Policy paper 'Young children and their services: developing a European approach'.



Valuing the work: a 0-6 profession and parity with school teachers

This principle says: “Our image of services for young children and the principles outlined above [in the *Children in Europe* Policy paper] require a professional worker who is qualified to work in a pedagogical way with children from birth to 6 years, and to work not only with children, but also with their families and the wider community. This is complex, demanding and important work. The professional may take a variety of different forms; she or he, for example, may be a pedagogue, a teacher, an atelierista, a pedagoga; in some countries, there will be a separate and quite distinct 0-6 profession, while in other countries work with young children will be an area of specialisation within a broader profession. But whatever the form, all professionals need certain common competences: to think critically, to make contextualised judgements, to work with both individuals and groups, to border cross, and to listen, communicate and work democratically. All professional workers, too, need to be equal with teachers in the compulsory school system, with respect to the level of initial qualification and continuing professional development (continuous education), pay and other employment conditions. There are different views about what proportion of the workforce should be qualified at this professional level: in our view (following ‘Quality Targets’), at least 60 percent should be, and this should apply equally to female and male workers”

What does this principle mean?

This principle calls for early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to be based on a professional workforce, well educated, competent and having parity with school teachers. In most countries this means a Bachelor's degree as a basic qualification, but in some countries it means a Master's degree. This professional – who may be a teacher or a pedagogue – will work across the whole early years period, with children under and over 3 years, and make up a majority of the workforce, though not necessarily all of it. This is not the case today in much of Europe, where many early childhood workers have a low professional status, low qualification levels and low pay – especially in services for children from 0 to 3 years.

More specifically, this principle means we need to raise the qualification level of staff, invent more pathways to professionalization and change our thinking about professionalism, to include a systemic dimension. We develop each of these themes below.

RAISING THE QUALIFICATION LEVEL

Drawing on an earlier recommendation (EC Childcare Network, 1996), we propose that at least 60 percent of the ECEC workforce should be graduates. We are not proposing just a graduate leadership, but a graduate workforce working directly with children and families.

What do we mean by graduate? There can, in principle, be no justification for applying lower standards to an early childhood profession, compared with school teachers; their work is similarly important, complex and demanding. ETUCE, the social partner in the EU representing early childhood teachers and pedagogues, suggests, therefore, that early childhood professionals should have the same level of qualifications and the same status, rights and rewards as school teachers. An expert group on teacher education working for the European Commission recommended that school teaching should be seen as a graduate profession at Master's level (European Commission, 2005). As a first step, the early childhood professional should be educated to at least a Bachelor's level, but this should increase to a Master's level in line with improvements in the education of school teachers. Whatever the level of initial education, members of the early childhood profession should

be able not only to access continuous ('in-service') education, but proceed to higher degrees, up to doctoral level, building a cadre of highly qualified educators.

DIVERSE PATHWAYS OF PROFESSIONALISATION

Taking into account that the current European workforce consists of many ECEC workers with low or no qualifications, what can we do to ensure access to a good education for all staff? It is important to ensure that all existing workers can improve their education and move, if they choose, towards a graduate qualification, in a way that values their acquired experiences and competences. 'Dead-end jobs' are no incentive for individual development and will not attract enough people into the work.

Different pathways to professionalisation are possible, not only direct entry. There is substantial evidence that a coherent and diversified policy aimed at continuous professional development at institutional or team level, developed by specialised staff (pedagogical co-ordinators (*pedagogistas*) or counsellors), can yield beneficial effects (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, & Van Laere, 2011). But there is virtually no evidence of the effectiveness of the most common form of continuous education found today - short-term training (e.g. limited to a few days per year), often knowledge- or technique-based, with variation in nature and quality (Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Jaegher, Shlay, & Weinraub, 2000; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008).

So we need to be clear about alternative pathways to professionalisation. Continuous education can be an important route for practitioners with low or no qualifications: but it must be of sufficient intensity and length and embedded in a coherent policy and in an integral education plan for each individual ECEC service. It is only effective when accompanied by certain conditions, such as team meetings, supervision, and coaching on the job.

BEYOND AN INDIVIDUAL APPROACH TO PROFESSIONALISATION

The term ‘professionalisation’ is often associated with individual qualities or qualifications. At the level of individual workers, being and becoming ‘competent’ is a continuous process that comprises the capability and ability to build on a body of professional knowledge and practice and develop and show professional values. As well as having a ‘body of knowledge’ and ‘practice’, workers need *reflective competences* as they work in highly complex, unpredictable and diverse contexts.

But the quality of the workforce is more than the sum of its individual parts. It is determined by the interaction between competent and qualified individuals and organizations in what we refer to as a ‘competent system’. A key feature of a ‘competent system’ is its support for individuals to realise their capability to develop practices that are responsive to the needs of children and families in ever changing societal contexts. A ‘competent system’ includes good initial education as well as possibilities for all staff to engage in joint learning and critical reflection; this includes sufficient paid time for these activities, team collaboration and continuous pedagogical support. A competent system includes collaborations between individuals, teams and institutions (pre-schools, schools, support services for children and families...), as well as ‘competent’ governance at policy level. Policies should invest in good working conditions, which reduce turnover of staff, invest in pedagogical support and address the gender gap. Equally important is the further education and competence development of directors, heads or managers of ECEC services. In these competent systems the ECEC profession can be truly valued and develop innovative practices that answer the needs of children and families in local contexts.

What is the basis of Principle 8?

QUALITY IN ECEC

Many researchers, practitioners and policymakers agree that the quality of early childhood services – and ultimately the outcomes for children, families and society – depends on well-educated, experienced and competent staff. Studies have demonstrated that staff with higher qualifications (i.e. at least Bachelor’s level) have a positive influence on quality indicators, as well as outcomes for children (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, O’Brien, & McCartney, 2002; Early et al., 2007; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). Improving quality crucially depends on improving both the education and working conditions of staff.

Professionalisation, therefore, has the ultimate goal of improving the quality of the workforce as a means to improve the quality of early childhood education and care. It also aims to improve the status of early years work, too often devalued, and the position of young children in society. For the status and recognition of young children’s learning, upbringing and well-being is clearly connected with the status and involvement of a valued and respected workforce in ECEC services. *Children in Europe’s* image of a ‘rich child’ – an active learner of great potential and a citizen with rights – calls for a ‘rich educator’.

What form that professionalism takes depends not only on our image of children but also on our understanding of concepts like ‘education’ and the values we hold to be important. *Children in Europe* argues that ECEC services should offer education in its broadest sense, an holistic education or pedagogy that addresses all facets of life: reason, emotion, body, mind. Play, exploration, freedom of movement, and relations with other children and adults are encouraged. This assumes that caring, learning, upbringing and social support of children are equally important and, indeed, inseparable.

To encourage children to grow and build self-confidence, it is necessary to respect children in their own multiple identities. In order to do that involving families and local communities is indispensable. Moreover, we see ECEC services as places where children, parents, practitioners and local communities can participate in democratic

practice. This enables these groups to contribute to the construction of a common project responsive to the needs of everybody. This is a challenging task, considering the existing diversity and societal power differences between and amongst these groups. Democratic practice is not just a given, it is a constant process of striving to create conditions so that everyone has the right to be heard and experience respect, recognition, solidarity, care and a sense of belonging in order to promote every child to be fitted for life (DECET & ISSA, 2011).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EARLY YEARS PROFESSIONALS?

Building democratic educational practices from a holistic viewpoint revolves around human relationships in a diverse context. Relationships are often complex and the work is unpredictable in nature. Professional workers cannot employ universally applicable practices and knowledge: there are no templates that simply require technical expertise. Applying prescribed learning goals or following hygiene and health guidelines are not sufficient to deal with this complex social reality. Professionals do much more than just execute technical practice, they are not technicians; they must work with ethics and values to enact a social practice. The ability to listen actively and engage in dialogue with children, families, colleagues are defining features of their professionalism. Theoretical and practical knowledge, which they have built over the years in initial and continuous education, helps them to understand and deal with complexity and diversity. Through critical reflection, professionals research and invent new practices that respond to the needs of a particular context. So we propose to turn away from a technical approach to professionalism, towards a more normative and research-based approach.

In order to critically reflect and make contextualized judgments, professional development should include time for documenting educational practices and reflecting critically on these practices with colleagues and families – what is called ‘pedagogical documentation’. All ECEC staff should have access to good initial and further education that adopts a holistic and democratic perspective. Services and educational institutions should be encouraged and supported to explore and experiment with diverse paradigms, theories and practices, to contest dominant discourses and to create new thinking and ways of working: we need educators who are aware

of alternative perspectives, who can think and dialogue, who can ask and answer political and ethical questions about education and care.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IS NOT JUST WOMEN’S WORK

Notwithstanding the highly complex and demanding character of work with young children, families and communities, there are many who doubt or deny the importance of a professionalized workforce, especially for working with the youngest children. Many believe that only mothers can and should care for a young child; early childhood workers are a last resort, and can only be mother-substitutes. Many, too, take it for granted that women have a natural capacity to care for children (Peeters, 2008). Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999) have documented this position extensively.

A simple logic follows this flawed assumption: women are essentially and naturally suited to care for young children...women therefore should be ECEC worker...being naturally suited, they need little ‘training’ for the work, and only low qualifications at most...they only require and deserve low pay for doing what comes naturally. With ECEC so often seen as substitute mothering (sometimes with some low level technical practice added) and as essentially ‘women’s work’, it is hardly surprising so few men are found in the early years workforce (Cameron, et al., 1999; Peeters, 2008). If we want to achieve a gender-neutral concept of professionalism, then we must rethink the nature of ECEC work and the structure of professionalism and it must be uncoupled from its gendered image (Cameron, et al., 1999, p. 25).

Professionalising early childhood work, moving it towards a well educated profession on a par with school teaching, will improve the attractiveness of working in ECEC services. It will also contribute to one of the biggest challenges facing Europe – to rethink the relationship between employment, care and gender. The care and education of young children is both women’s and men’s work, and work of the utmost importance for children, families, communities, nations and Europe.

What is the EU position?

Early childhood education and care has been, since the 1980s, a recurring item on European policy agendas. Over this period, however, the focus has shifted. Whereas initially policy interest was mostly driven by socio-economic concerns about employment, competitiveness and gender equality, more recently EU policy documents point to children's rights, questions of citizenship, equality of educational opportunity, lifelong learning and social cohesion. Therefore, according to the 2011 Council conclusions on ECEC (sub-titled 'Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow') high-quality is needed in order to meet all children's needs – cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and physical – in a holistic way (Council of the European Union, 2011). ECEC services should develop integrated approaches to education and care and should work in close partnership with parents, families and communities. To meet these requirements, the Council of the European Union recommends member states to invest in professionalisation of ECEC staff, with an emphasis on the development of their competences, qualifications and working conditions, and enhancing the prestige of the profession.

One of the main targets of the EU 2020 strategy is to ensure that 75% of 20 to 64-year-olds are employed (European Commission, 2010). In this context, ECEC is not only seen as a prerequisite for employment, enabling parents to work, but also as a source of employment. But the EU not only wants more employment, it also wants 'good quality' employment; Europe 2020, a strategy for sustainable growth and jobs, includes as one of its core guidelines 'developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs, promoting job quality and lifelong learning'.

As well as attracting, educating and retaining suitably qualified ECEC staff, the EU wants to improve the gender balance – ECEC as good quality employment for men as well as women. According to the 2011 Council conclusions on ECEC, increasing the proportion of men in ECEC is important in order to change attitudes and show that not only women can provide education and care. A workplace composed of both sexes contributes to widening children's experience and can also help to reduce gender segregation in the labour market (Council of the European Union, 2011).

What is the current situation in the EU?

There is no such thing as the 'European early childhood workforce'. International overviews reveal many different practitioners working in the field of early childhood education and care, bearing different names according to the country and the type of services they work in, the qualifications they have, or the functions they fulfil¹. Their names may vary from teachers and teaching assistants to educators, pedagogues, childcare workers and family day care providers with many different variations, even within one country.

These differences are related to diverse historical backgrounds and different ways of organising ECEC. The split system model, in which 'childcare' for the youngest children (under three or four years old) and 'nursery school' or 'kindergarten' for older children (up to compulsory school age) are separate, is common in Europe. It exists for example in Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and, the Netherlands. At the other extreme are fully integrated ECEC systems, in which policy making and administration, access, regulation, type of provision, funding and the workforce are fully integrated into one seamless whole; the Nordic countries and Slovenia provide examples. In between are some countries that have partially integrated, for example policy making and administration, but in important respects retain split systems; England, Scotland and Spain are examples. Fragmentation and inequality among the ECEC workforce are common in the split system model, but no longer exist in fully integrated systems, which organise their workforces around a graduate 0-6 professional.

WORKFORCE PROFILES

The SEEPRO study identified six recurrent profiles of core practitioners in European countries: the early childhood professional, the pre-primary professional, the pre-primary and primary school professional, the social pedagogy professional, the infant-toddler professional and the health/care professional (Oberhuemer, et al., 2010). A majority of core staff have a teaching profile, a minority of core staff have a social-pedagogical profile.

¹ [Cameron & Moss, 2007; Dalli, 2008; Dalli & Urban, 2010; European Commission, 2009; Eurydice, 2009; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010; Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997; OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012; Van Laere, Vandenbroeck, & Peeters, 2011]

In split systems, core staff in the childcare services predominantly have a caring or health profile.

A considerable part of the workforce is auxiliary staff, paid to ‘assist’ core staff. They have mainly a caring role. Some assistants also have a responsibility for supporting individual children in their learning (e.g. children with special needs) (Van Laere, Peeters, & Vandebroek, Forthcoming)

There is very little research on the content and format of initial education and job profiles. OECD’s Starting Strong I report described the contents of initial education programmes in 12 European countries. It identified gaps in these programmes, such as working with parents and working within a context of diversity. According to the recent CoRe study, working with the context of children, i.e. the parents, communities and society, remains significantly less emphasized in job and education competence profiles compared with tasks or competences focused on children; competences and required knowledge are formulated in terms of what to do with children in order to stimulate children’s learning, well-being, upbringing and development (see Figure 1 & 2).

A survey among experts in 15 European countries reveals that very little, if any, attention is devoted to discussing the meaning of early childhood education with parents, nor to the relation between early childhood services and the broader community. In some profiles this perspective is totally absent, in others it is described as a secondary task or described in far less concrete terms than competences oriented towards children. In a few countries, job and training profiles stress communicative competences, but mainly meaning how to inform parents or how to discuss with them how to reinforce the pedagogical approach of the service – hardly the sort of democratic practice we have proposed. There are some exceptions, in Italy, France and Belgium, where some profiles start from practitioners who engage with children and their families in a more collaborative way (Van Laere, et al., 2011).

WORKFORCE QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Various authors have indicated that whether a country has a ‘split’ or ‘unitary’ system has important consequences for the professionalism of the staff members, especially those working with the youngest children (from birth to

three or four)^[2]. It is typical of split regimes that highly qualified and well-paid teachers work in schools or kindergartens, whereas childcare for children up to the age of three is left to personnel with lower or no formal qualifications, who are also paid significantly less. In unitary systems core professionals are highly qualified and well-paid to work with children from birth to 6 (see Table 1).

Table 1: qualification levels for ECEC staff in 17 European countries

Country	Do services for children under 3 have same workforce profile as services for children over 3?	Description of professionals educated to graduate (bachelor) level and age group they work with
Belgium	No – lower	Teacher (2½-5 years)
Denmark	Yes	Pedagogue (0-5 years)
Finland	Yes	Preschool Teacher (0-5 years)
France	No – lower	Teacher (2-5 years)
Germany	Yes	None [3]
Greece	No – lower	Teacher (2½-5 years)
Ireland	No – lower	Teacher (4-5 years)
Italy	No – lower	Educator (0-3 years) [4] Teacher (3-6 years)
Netherlands	No – lower	Teacher (4- years)
Norway	Yes	Preschool Teacher (0-5 years)
Poland	No – lower	Teacher (3-6 years)
Portugal	No – lower	Teacher (0-5 years)
Romania	No – lower [5]	Teacher (3-5 years)
Slovenia	Yes	Pre-school teacher (0-6 years)
Spain	No – lower	Teacher (0-5 years)
Sweden	Yes	Preschool Teacher (0-5 years)
UK	No – lower	Teacher (3-4 years) England: Early Years Professional (0-4 years)

Source: Children in Europe, No 15, 2008, p. 6 - updated August 2012

2 (Bennett, 2005; Moss, 2005; Oberhuemer, 2000, 2005; Oberhuemer, et al., 2010; OECD, 2006)

3 Some social pedagogues, educated to Bachelor’s level, work in German services, usually as heads of centres; they are not found in most services. According to 2010 statistics 3.8% of the workforce in centre-based settings are now educated at graduate level (i.e. Bachelor or above)

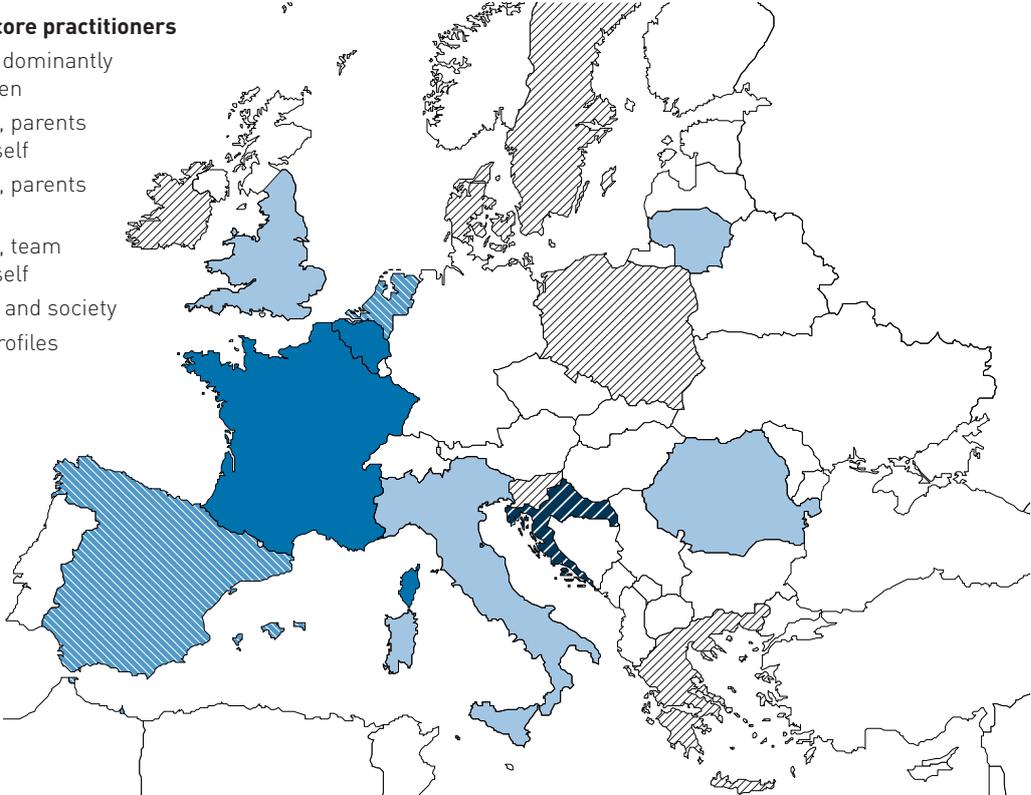
4 University-based Bachelor-level education was introduced 2005, so most current educators are qualified at a lower level while most new entrants have the new qualification. There are regional variations in standards, e.g. Emilia Romagna region has required all new professionals from 2010 to have a university education.

5 A university-based Bachelor-level teacher qualification with a focus on the under threes was introduced from 2008. The current education is a three year, post-secondary health care qualification.

Figure 1: Professional Competence profile for core professionals in 15 European countries.

Professional profile core practitioners

- Competences are dominantly oriented on children
- Focus on children, parents and professional self
- Focus on children, parents and society
- Focus on children, team and professional self
- Focus on children and society
- No professional profiles

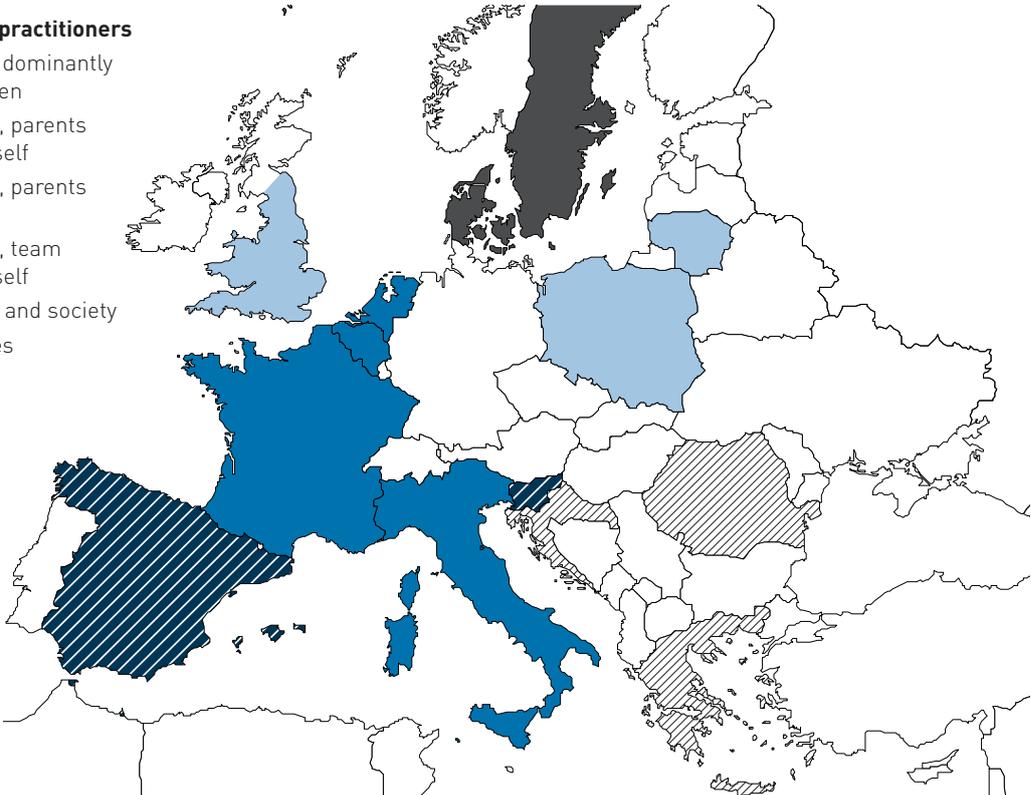


Source : CoRe, 2011

Figure 2: Training Competence profile for core professionals in 15 European countries.

Training profile core practitioners

- Competences are dominantly oriented on children
- Focus on children, parents and professional self
- Focus on children, parents and society
- Focus on children, team and professional self
- Focus on children and society
- No training profiles



Source : CoRe, 2011

But a recent study highlights how these higher qualified core professionals in split systems, as well as those in unitary systems, are often assisted by lower or unqualified auxiliary staff (CoRe, 2011). Their number varies from a small percentage to up to 50% in some European countries, but they all share certain features: their working conditions, salary, opportunities for professional development and access to qualifying education are significantly inferior to those of the core professional staff with whom they work. Also the professionalisation of family day carers remains a problem, even within unitary systems; their education and working conditions are not as good as those of staff who work in group care services.

To illustrate how workforce profiles depend on a specific historical and organisational context, we refer to an analysis of Pamela Oberhuemer (2011, pp. 32-37): she looks at similarities and differences in the formal qualification requirements and professional profiles for core staff in 12 EU countries grouped into four clusters: three English-speaking or mainly English-speaking countries (Ireland, Malta, UK); three Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden); three central/eastern European states (Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia); and three French-speaking or partly French-speaking countries (Belgium, France, Luxembourg).

- in the UK, the Republic of Ireland and Malta, there has been less of a tradition of a highly professionalised early years workforce for children up to compulsory school age. In the UK and Ireland, those working in state-maintained schools before compulsory primary schooling are mostly trained as primary school teachers, either with a specialisation in the early years (possible in England, Scotland, Wales) or not (generally the case in Northern Ireland and Ireland). Their competence profile is strongly linked to the logistics of the education system and excludes work with the under-threes. There is a wide variety of vocational qualifications for work in the non-statutory 'childcare' sector, with education on the whole focused on working with young children from birth to five or birth to eight.
- In contrast to the fragmented landscapes in the English-speaking countries, the development of qualification routes for early childhood staff in the Nordic EU countries – Denmark, Finland and Sweden – has been characterized by a co-ordinated approach

towards early childhood services. This has led to a single qualification for the core staff in early childhood settings, with no dividing lines between 'education' and 'care', and in all three countries the higher education study route leads to at least a Bachelor degree (three years' duration in Finland, three-and-a-half years' duration in Denmark and Sweden). Norway and Iceland are similar (a three years Bachelor's degree in Norway, and a five year Master's degree in Iceland).

- The situation in Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia differs considerably. Hungary has developed along clearly divided lines, with specialised and separate qualification routes for work in kindergartens (three to six years) and childcare centres (birth to three years); kindergarten pedagogues, in the former, are educated at teacher education colleges affiliated with universities, compared with a three year post-secondary course for childcare workers. Slovenia has a unitary system and the qualification profile for working in the age-integrated centres for 0 to 6-year-olds in Slovenia is that of an early childhood professional with a specialisation in pedagogy across the early years, including work with 7-year-olds in school alongside first-grade teachers, acquired in a three year University education. Slovakia has very few childcare services for under 3s, and its kindergarten educators have a four year upper secondary vocational qualification. There are policy proposals to raise the requirement to Bachelor level, but the target date is not until 2020. At the same time, higher education courses specialising in early childhood education at Magister level (now Master's) have long been established, but these have not been a requirement, and only an estimated 12 per cent of the workforce has this qualification.
- In France and Belgium there is a very long tradition of a professionalised workforce for those working in pre-primary education institutions for 2.5/3 to 6-year-olds within the education system. In both countries, these developments started around 1880, with France today having the highest formal level of qualification requirement for work in ECEC services in Europe - a three-year university course, followed by two years of postgraduate professional preparation, though this education is confined to working with children over 3 years. In all three countries, however, a split system of administrative responsibility for different age-groups has led to fractured qualification systems. In France,

for those working in childcare centres outside the education system, qualifications of core practitioners are generally of a high formal level, but traditionally with a focus on healthcare rather than pedagogy. The early childhood educator (*éducatrice/éducateur de jeunes enfants*) was introduced in 1973 and qualifies candidates for working with children from birth to seven and their families in diverse settings outside the education system. Inspired by this social pedagogical work profile, Belgium (Flandres) started recently a bachelor education to work in different care settings (0 to 3 and out of school care) and pedagogical support programs for parents and children. In Luxembourg there has been a steady increase in the formal requirements for working with 4- to 6-year-olds in pre-primary education and with 3-year-olds in early education groups. Staff obtain a four-year general teacher education courses at bachelor level; these include one mandatory semester of studies in another country. Professionals working with children outside the education system in childcare provision are generally qualified at higher education level in social pedagogy and special needs education. (Oberhuemer, 2011, pp. 32-37)

Examples of valuing the work

GENDER NEUTRAL 0-6 PROFESSION

Denmark provides an interesting example of an initial tertiary education for a graduate professional. The education takes 3.5 years and leads to a Bachelor's degree, a generic qualification to work as a pedagogue across a wide range of services for children, young people and adults – including ECEC services with children under and over 3 years. This professional *pædagog* education is carried out within a social pedagogical tradition that focuses on broad competences rather than a list of skills. It is based on a holistic approach to children and adults as well as on the personal development of future educators who can work in a variety of settings. This generic approach and the recognition of students' previous work experiences have contributed to attracting more men into the ECEC field in Denmark than in any other EU Member State (Jensen in CoRe, 2011).

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS INTO PROFESSIONALISM

In the École Santé Social Sud-Est de Lyon, unqualified practitioners can gain access to tertiary education while continuing to work part time, *qualifying as éducatrice/éducateur de jeunes enfants*. Through analysing their practice at ESSSE, they gain deep reflective competencies as well as knowledge and skills on a tertiary level (Behar & Mony in CoRe, 2011). This method, called 'analyse de pratiques', does not aim solely at the acquisition of knowledge, but also at the production of knowledge starting from concrete situations. In the first year, via this analysis of internship experiences, the foundations are laid for a personal track towards professionalism. In the second and third years, the situations that the students experience and generate questions are discussed in the group (Peeters, 2008). Using this approach, Meunier (2004) seeks to develop new competences among the students, so that it then becomes possible for them – later, as professionals – to anticipate unforeseen pedagogic situations.

A COMPETENT SYSTEM FOR COMPETENT WORKERS

The local municipalities of Pistoia (Italy) and Ghent (Flemish community of Belgium) show how professional development initiatives in combination with a team of pedagogical coordinators (*pedagogistas*) or counsellors

can lead to high levels of reflective professionalism, and equip teams to work in complex contexts of diversity. This calls for continuous pedagogical support for staff documenting their practice and reflecting upon it. A general curriculum or a set of guiding principles is an important supportive element for this reflection. In these cases, the focus on collegiality and solidarity, not only within the team, but also across teams, enables assistants to take part in this systemic professionalisation process, and to develop a common culture of reflection (Musatti, Picchio, Mayer in CoRe, 2011; Peeters, Brandt in CoRe, 2011).

Early years workers and professionals reflect together on quality

In Slovenia, continuous education is organised for different professionals with diverse responsibilities across a variety of pre-school institutions and in the first year of primary school. Various professionals and semi-professionals – with different levels of formal education – are included in these professional development processes: pre-school teachers, pre-school teachers' assistants, primary school teachers and Roma teaching assistants. By negotiating their roles and responsibilities together, they work on innovating practices that include learning and caring (Vonta, et al in CoRe, 2011).

A last example of an interesting pathway to increase competences is ISSA's 'Principles of Quality Pedagogy: Competent educators for the 21st century', that have been implemented in 27 countries in Eastern Europe and central Asia. In 1998, the International Step by Step Association began to develop the first pedagogical quality standards for ECEC teachers. As member NGOs and ISSA have worked with the standards over the years, there has been continuous shared learning and developed understanding about the required competences for early years teachers. On the basis of this shared learning, and with the help of a group of experts, these standards were revised in 2007 and are now called Principles of Quality Pedagogy (ISSA, 2010).

Next steps

Taking into account obstacles that the European early years workforce currently is facing, we describe steps that are needed to achieve this principle. We draw on a recent study commissioned by the European Commission on competence requirements in ECEC (Urban, et al., 2011).

SOME OBSTACLES TO BEAR IN MIND...

- This is a time of budget cuts all over Europe. It is important, therefore, that the different European countries stimulate each other to invest not only in quantity but also in the quality of the ECEC workforce. A well educated and supported workforce is crucial to increasing the quality of ECEC; while a devalued workforce contributes to bad quality ECEC, which may harm children, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- There is a growing demand for people to work with young children (but also in other important work with young people and elderly people). One response is to look for untapped supplies of cheap labour: low quality employment providing low quality services. The other response is to see this work as a source of growing good quality employment for both women and men, for example by raising the status of the ECEC workforce and developing effective strategies for recruiting men as well as women and more staff from minority ethnic groups (Cameron & Moss, 2007; European Commission, 2007). The ECEC workforce in Europe is currently homogeneous in terms of gender and ethnicity (OECD, 2006). Viewing, as we do, ECEC as a democratic and inclusive practice, it is important that this workforce is representative of its society and that full use is made of the richness of that society. This greatly enhances caring and learning and partnerships with families from diverse backgrounds.
- The low status of many ECEC workers, with low or no qualifications, may threaten the professionalisation of other, more qualified, colleagues. In 1997, for example, Denmark introduced education for pedagogical assistants. From 2009 it was called the Pedagogical Assistant Education (*Pædagogisk Assistent Uddannelse*, PAU), which is a post-16 upper secondary vocational training. This education provides staff who have little or no relevant ECEC qualifications with some

knowledge; and to avoid it becoming a dead-end solution, there are also easy options for further education to become an ECEC professional with a graduate qualification. But in Denmark, and also France, there is a fear that budgetary measures could favour the influx of unskilled or low-skilled (and cheaper) assistants, reducing the ratio of qualified professionals (Van Laere, et al., 2011) – devaluing, not valuing, the work.

...THINKING AHEAD TO 2020

While respecting the different historical contexts and ECEC systems, European countries need to develop a professionalization strategy – or review their strategy if they already have one. This means having a clear direction of travel for developing a well educated 0-6 profession for ECEC services, having parity with school teachers, including a timetable for achieving the goal of a 60% graduate profession. 2020 should be marked on that timetable, with substantial progress achieved by this date.

Part of that strategy involves further dialogue on what kind of 0-6 profession is needed to ensure quality ECEC: not only what profession, but the profile of that profession. This in turn should be done within a wider context. Discussing the professionalization of the workforce is not possible without discussing the kind of education we want. What is the purpose, the goals and values of education, including early childhood education, in order to promote holistic views on education that foster all aspects of individual, inter-personal and social development. Training, education and job profiles, as they are today, too often omit important dimensions, such as collaborating with parents, local communities and wider society. How can this be compatible with a holistic, democratic and contextual view on education? As part of this dialogue, it is necessary to evaluate how current initial and in-service education matches the desired quality requirements. Countries can learn from each other to improve their professionalization strategies.

The quality of provision and every child's right to education need as much attention as the quantity (accessibility and affordability). Early childhood education and care can promote social inclusion and form the basis for lifelong learning. Considering the key role of the workforce in terms of quality, there should

be as much attention given to their qualification and competence in policy documents as those of school teachers. From a systemic perspective it needs to be added that *inclusive* professionalization needs *diversification* as well as a *general increase* of formal qualifications, starting with a Bachelor level degree. But the full range of qualifications, including Master's and Doctoral levels, needs to be available to the ECEC profession.

Professionalizing the workforce goes beyond strengthening individual practitioners' competences. We need a systemic approach that starts from a competent system instead of a competent individual. A coherent policy framework needs to address all components of the competent system. National policies should ensure the following aspects are in place and interrelated:

- A *curriculum framework*, addressing overall goals, principles and competences for working with young children from birth to at least compulsory school age and their families, regardless of the institutional setting.
- A *qualification framework* addressing professional preparation and professional development for all members of the ECEC workforce, including assistant and support staff.
- A *quality framework* addressing criteria for the level of quality required from all early childhood services, and ways to develop good practices.
- A *monitoring and evaluation framework* ensuring data on the ECEC sector are collected systematically and evaluations involving all key stakeholders are conducted regularly.
- A *framework for governance* addressing policy responsibilities at different levels of government (e.g. municipal, regional, national) and linking early childhood policies to a wider policy context (e.g. education, welfare, citizenship, equality).
- A *research framework* with close cooperation between ECEC staff and research institutes in order to build knowledge and practice on both theoretical and praxis approaches to aim, content and methods of ECEC services.
- A *financial review and planning* of the returns on investment in high quality ECEC services and workforce.

Policies to increase professionalization focusing only on initial professional education, without addressing

employment and work conditions, will be ineffective. Individual and team competences flourish when supported by local and/or national policies. This includes a combination of regulations on work conditions and on professionalism and needs to include the relevant social partners – local, regional, and national. Working conditions for individual professionals are a key factor in developing a competent system. Regarding work regulations, policies that guarantee decent wages (e.g. pay parity with primary school teachers) not only value the work and the educators, but also reduce staff turnover and enhance professional and social status. Equally important is the right to time without children ('non-contact time'), in order to meet with colleagues within the institution and with colleagues of other services.

The constant need to coordinate policies between different government departments with fragmented responsibilities for the ECEC system ties down scarce resources and has proven to be ineffective. The integration of services for all young children either in the education or welfare system in a unitary system results in more coherent policies, increased professionalism, higher qualification requirements and better wages

Different pathways to professionalisation are possible, and need to be specified in professionalization strategies. This demands a re-think of existing approaches to continuing education and a turn towards more sustained and comprehensive approaches. Investments in continuous pedagogical support have the potential to make a strong impact on the quality of ECEC services, as they lead to continuous professional development of the workforce.

A large part of the ECEC workforce consists of lower-qualified assistants and core staff. Professionalization strategies need to include these groups and recognise that in most EU countries they have less access to continuing education than their more qualified peers. The role of the lower-qualified assistant needs more attention, especially in relation to the EU goals of combating child poverty and fostering diversity and social cohesion, as stated in the EU's document Education and Training 2020 and the Commission's communication on ECEC (European Commission, 2011). In contexts of socio-economic and ethnic diversity, under-represented groups (e.g. members of ethnic, cultural, linguistic minorities and marginalised groups) need to be specifically targeted

to ensure their access to professional qualifications. Options for meeting this challenge may include shared professional development and team meetings to build up a shared culture and language, as well as investing in pathways that enable assistants to obtain a necessary professional qualification at their own pace.

Within its capacities, the European Commission could take initiatives to work towards a European framework for quality of early childhood provision to complement the agreed quantitative targets. Quality indicators developed within this framework should have a specific (but not an only) focus on the workforce and systemic approaches to professionalization.

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