

INVESTING IN PROFESSIONALIZATION OF ECEC STAFF TO FOSTER SMOOTH TRANSITIONS IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND BEYOND:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic had and is having negative effects on the lives of children and families, in terms of social and economic wellbeing. In this respect, ECEC plays a crucial supportive role for all children and families, and especially for the ones at risk of social exclusion (United Nation, 2020).

The pandemic showed us how crucial it is to keep the relationship between ECEC centres and families and children alive. This is fundamental during lockdown periods, and during re-opening, when not only newly enrolled children and families access ECEC centres, but also the already attending ones need to re-familiarize with the ECEC environment. Considering the possible fear and stress that parents and children experienced during the pandemic situation, ECEC had to invest even more than usual in establishing a partnership with families based on mutual trust.

This calls for a renewed attention to the theme of transitions, as relational spaces in which families, children and ECEC staff co-construct trust and strong partnership. It is exactly through this crisis that the crucial role of transitions in supporting the relationship ECEC centre-families-children should be re-discovered.

The need to invest in transitions is underlined by the Recommendation on high quality ECEC systems (Council of the European Union, 2019, 12-13), when stating that *'early childhood education and care settings can develop good practices for a smooth transition from the home environment to the setting, as well as foster high levels of parental participation by organising specific initiatives. [...] Whenever possible, the curriculum can provide guidelines for early childhood education and care staff to liaise with school staff on children's transition to the primary and/or pre-primary schools'*.

In order to invest in this direction, competent ECEC staff is needed, as underlined in the report of the ET2020 Working Group on ECEC about 'How to recruit, train and motivate well qualified staff', which also underlines that *'in an ECEC environment all staff can be expected to: [...] work with the local community and within the ECEC system; work as part of a team; [...] support children's transition into and from ECEC settings [...]'* (European Commission, 2020, 81).

This calls for investment in both initial and continuing education paths for *all* ECEC staff (core practitioners, assistants...) (Peeters et al., 2016). On the one hand, there is a need in raising and improving the level of qualification required for ECEC staff, as stated in the paper edited by Children in Europe on the principle 8 (Children in Europe, 2012, 3): *'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'. On the other hand, investment in support reflection on daily practice is needed, as stated again in the above mentioned report of the ET2020 Working Group on ECEC (European Commission, 2020, 5): *'[...] it is increasingly important that there is continued support for staff training and development'*.

Drawing on the policy guidelines elaborated within the NESET study *'Governing quality ECEC in a global crisis: lessons learned from Covid-19 pandemic'* (2021), the **INTRANS project** has identified **six key actions** that policy decision-makers, providers and leaders should undertake – in dialogue with trade unions organisations – to promote professionalization of ECEC staff, in times of crisis and beyond:

1) Invest in initial and in-service training based on relational, reflective and methodological competences.

Developing relational competences in order to work with families and children is crucial to create partnerships with diverse families and support children's wellbeing and development. In the same way, being able to reflect on daily practice and to transform it when necessary is crucial too. In contexts in which ECEC centres invested in this direction (already before the crisis), staff was more able to deal with the unpredictable consequences of the pandemic: the re-adaptation of practice would then combine the sanitary protocol with the pedagogical framework of the ECEC centre, prioritizing children and families wellbeing. In these cases, for example, several alternative ways were found to keep contacts with families and children during the lockdown, and to welcome them back in a warm and inclusive way (online meetings; door to door visits; alternative use of outdoor spaces; increased use of pedagogical documentation...). Methodological competences (such as observation, documentation, planning) should be developed too. These competences are in a circular relationship with each other, and support the flexibility of educational programs based on the observation of children.

2) Invest in ongoing pedagogical support and supportive working conditions for all ECEC staff, in order to be able to create smooth transitions for children and families.

CPD is crucial in supporting ECEC staff in enhancing pedagogical quality of services for young children, as also underlined by the European Quality Framework for ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) and by the European Commission's report on staff professionalization (Working Group on ECEC, 2020). In crisis times, supporting professionals through CPD activities appears fundamental exactly because of the very quick and demanding adaptations required on the level of practice. During the pandemic, in contexts in which CPD activities kept going on, ECEC staff could better find ways to implement the safety measures in their everyday practice without losing sight of the pedagogical framework orienting their work with children and families. In these contexts, smooth transitions were maintained and created through alternative ways of meeting families, familiarization moments, flexibility towards the needs of children and families. The latter includes the possibility of setting more favourable staff-child ratios, which was granted within the new arrangements of ECEC groups into 'bubbles'. In fact, smaller groups and improved staff-child ratio provided better conditions for ECEC staff to observe children's peer interactions and sustain child-initiated learning. Therefore, systemic conditions should be put in place to ensure joint reflection

among core professionals and assisting staff, not only by granting child-free hours for collegial meetings, but also by providing joint work opportunities for staff – such as co-presence – which are beneficial to children’s learning and socialising processes, as well as to adults (facilitating children’s observations and intervision among colleagues). This proved to be especially important in times of crises, when collective pedagogical decision-making processes become crucial for supporting individuals and teams in facing complex challenges and uncertain situations. During the pandemic, childfree hours were reduced in some cases in order to cover the expenses needed for extra substitute staff, and this affected the quality of pedagogical practice in ECEC centres.

3) Invest in pedagogical leadership in order to accompany and support staff in creating warm and inclusive transitions for children and families.

The pandemic crisis clearly showed that the more ECEC centers were able to rely on high-quality leadership, the better they could deal with the unpredictable nature of the situation – e.g., by creating emotional stability for children, families and staff members; by ensuring clear communication flows both internally (among ECEC staff) and externally (with families and with local authority services). Pedagogical leaders are key connecting links between center-based pedagogical planning, governance of local ECEC systems and policy implementation. Therefore, they should be systematically engaged – either directly or through representation (including trade union organizations) – in policy consultation initiatives and experts’ working groups at local, regional and national level.

4) Invest in improving ICT infrastructure and staff’s competences on ICT, in order to support smooth transitions.

Investment should be made toward improving ICT infrastructure, as digital tools can support working on warm and inclusive transitions also in pandemic times. Digital tools helped ECEC staff to have contacts with families before and during familiarization moments, to share pedagogical documentation of children’s experiences with parents, to have ongoing contacts with families. Adequate training to staff on how to use ICT infrastructures should be provided too, when needed.

5) Invest in horizontal and vertical collaboration amongst professionals with different profiles.

In contexts in which the collaboration between professionals with different profiles working with the same children and families (e.g. preschool and out of school care staff) was already established before the crisis, ECEC staff could better face the challenges of the pandemic when it comes to the relationship with families and children. In the same way, in split ECEC systems, the collaboration between childcare (0-3 y.o.) and preschool (3-6 y.o.) centres supported fostering warm and inclusive transitions for families and children.

6) Invest in creating Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) amongst ECEC professionals.

In continuously changing societies, traditional forms of professional development (attending conferences, workshops, courses) are not anymore sufficient (Brajković, 2014). Bottom-up approaches, based on co-reflecting on practice, are needed, in order to effect the daily work of staff.

Moreover, ECEC services are places where children, parents, professionals and local communities can participate in democratic practice. PLCs offer a great opportunity to invest in this direction. In PLCs, professionals are engaged in reflective dialogues with colleagues of their and of other ECEC centres, they observe each other practices, they invest in dialogue with families, they create shared values and vision (Sharmahd et al., 2017). Contexts that could avail of this kind of practices during the crisis felt better supported and less isolated, and could better guarantee warm and inclusive transitions for all children and families.

References

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