



# **STRENGTHENING PROFESSIONALISATION AND COLLABORATION FOR ASSISTING PRACTITIONERS IN ECEC**

## **ACTIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**



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**«Professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes. Developing common education and training programmes for all staff working in an ECEC context (e.g. preschool teachers, assistants, educators, family day carers etc.), helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality.»**

#### European Quality Framework for ECEC

**T**here is a growing evidence that quality is strongly linked to competent and motivated staff, who need to be recognized and valorised. This implies the strong need for more ecosystemic conditions on ECEC provision to improve professional practice based in continuous professional development (CPD) for the entire workforce.

Quality also implies the need to create a continuous flow between training, practice, research, and policy to enable positive social change and promote the quality of life for children, families, professionals, and all community.

Investing in competent ECEC systems<sup>1</sup> means:

- ▶ valuing the role of all the professionals and create a shared set of values and understanding of the image of the child;
- ▶ collaboration between individuals and teams, institutions (pre-schools, schools, support services for children and families...);
- ▶ value the crucial role that family participation plays in the early years;
- ▶ the urgency for a qualified workforce to deal with continuous and complex societal change;
- ▶ strong, sustainable governance and public policies at European and national level.

1. Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A., Peeters, J. (2012). Towards Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care. Implications for Policy and Practice. *European Journal of Education*, 47(4), 508-526.

## WHY VALUE THE ROLE OF ASSISTANT PRACTITIONERS?

### ASSISTING PRACTITIONERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Assisting practitioners in ECEC mostly do not have official competence profiles, either for their profession or for their training. Even when the position and competences of assisting practitioners are recognised by national regulations or in individual settings, they are at risk of being perceived as merely technical workers. Whereas the role of core practitioner is generally perceived to primarily involve 'teaching', assisting practitioners are generally perceived to assume a more 'caring' role. They are responsible for children's hygiene, protection and emotional well-being so that the teacher can focus on the learning process. This division is predominantly seen in preschools for children aged between three to six in split systems, yet it is present even in some unitary systems, despite notable exceptions. The division of tasks does present an obstacle to a holistic conceptualisation of education in its broadest sense, in which learning is inherently connected with care and caring is educational in nature.

If we want to value the job of assisting practitioners and improve working within a holistic educare approach, assisting and core practitioner need to improve their relational and reflective competences to enhance the collaboration. However, this cannot solely be their responsibility as this also requires competence systems in which conditions are set to enable initial and continuous professional development for all groups of practitioners working with young children and their families.<sup>2</sup>

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The crucial role of the ECEC workforce in enhancing the pedagogical quality of services for young children is underlined by the European Quality Framework for ECEC (EQF). This EQF states that 'professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes. Developing common education and training programmes for all staff working in an ECEC context (e.g. preschool teachers, assistants, educators, family day carers etc.), helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality.' This statement is in line with research findings showing that quality is strongly linked to competent and motivated staff, who need to be recognized and valorised (e.g. CoRe,<sup>3</sup> Eurofound,<sup>4</sup> Care Study<sup>5</sup>).

A stronger investment in continuous professional development (CPD) for the whole staff is needed: in most European countries, CPD paths only involve the core practitioners, not the assisting practitioners. When they include assistants, the

2. Rutar, S., Jensen, B., Marques, A., Cardona, M.J., Van der Mespel S & Van Laere, K. (2019). Supporting the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners. VALUE Literature Review in 4 countries (BE, DK, PT, SL). Ljubljana: ERI.

3. Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A. & Peeters, J. (2011). Competence requirements in early childhood education and care. Final report. London and Brussels, European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture.

4. Eurofound (2015). Working conditions, training of early childhood care workers and quality of services – A systematic review, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

5. Jensen, P., & Rasmussen, A. W. (2016). Professional development and its impact on children in early childhood education and care: A meta-analysis based on European studies. CARE project; Curriculum and Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). <http://ecec-care.org/resources/publications>.

paths for the latter and for core practitioners are separated.<sup>6</sup> This means that assisting practitioners and core practitioners don't have opportunities, nor time, to reflect, learn and plan together. As they are both involved in daily practices and interactions with children and families, collaboration and shared reflection are crucial. Through collaborative learning and work, ECEC professionals can observe and address more aspects concerning the well-being, development and learning needs of children. The different competences and the multiple perspectives within a team of professionals become a resource for developing sustainable solutions for complex challenges in contexts of diversity.

Finally, a large group of assisting practitioners have a short vocational qualification or no formal qualifications. Consequently, there are few possibilities of job mobility. A competent system should facilitate them in getting a higher qualification if they wish to. Possibilities for job mobility, through adapted pathways towards qualification need to be created, to provide opportunities for assisting practitioners.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COUNTRIES AND WITHIN COUNTRIES

ECEC 'assistants' can't be approached as a homogeneous group. There are big differences between countries and within countries.

- ▶ Between countries: e.g. in Slovenia assistants are more involved in professional development than in the other countries. They have a longer tradition in which core practitioners and assistants collaborate in an egalitarian way. This is linked to several

systemic conditions, such as unitary ECEC system (which are more likely to adopt an integrated educate approach), real job title, availability of competence profile, collaboration between teachers and teachers' assistants is part of the curriculum. The training background of assistants is also very divers; it doesn't always concern lower educated professionals.

- ▶ Within countries: who the assistants are, their background and the extent to which they are involved in collaborative practice and learning often differs from school to school.

Furthermore, also structural differences in the ECEC system and culture have an impact on the situation and challenges of ECEC assistants: e.g. being a split or unified system, the extent to which an educate approach is already part of the ECEC curriculum and/or practice, and the extent to which a participatory approach is part of the ECEC system and culture. Next, differences exist in structural conditions supporting (or hindering) shared CPD and collaboration for assisting and core practitioners. Factors that hinders participation and collaboration are for example low payment, less or no childfree hours, limited number of working hours in one group and/or school, etc.

## CHALLENGES TO IMPROVE QUALITY

Workforce issues and challenges are complex and entrenched, and European and national leadership is needed to provide strategic, comprehensive, and impactful solutions.

### TO START

- ▶ All stakeholders have a role to play and interlinking responsibilities in advancing the goal of a sustainable highly skilled workforce: governments, teacher regulatory authorities, employers, peak bodies and associations, higher education institutes, registered training organisations, and professionals.
- ▶ Actions should focus on improving the attraction, retention, and quality (structural and process quality).<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ Develop workforce strategy and action plan through consultation and co-design process.
- ▶ Be appropriately ambitious and cover a sufficient timeframe to address workforce issues and challenges.

## THE WAY FORWARD RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Based on VALUE-research and discussions with stakeholders in different countries,<sup>8</sup> this text describes recommended actions for policy and practice to increase the professionalisation of ECEC assisting practitioners and the added value of collaboration between assisting and core practitioners.

The lessons learned from the VALUE project highlight within the ECEC workforce the urgency of raise professionalization of assisting practitioners what can be achieved by:

1. Foster collaboration between stakeholders in the ECEC system with a view to raise awareness and develop locally rooted solutions.
2. Invest in professional development initiatives in which assisting, core practitioners and leaders collaborate on an equal footing.
3. Develop working conditions which strengthen the position and agency of assisting practitioners with low-level qualifications.

7. Structural features, such as time, space, and other resources. Process features, such as motivation, openness and engagement. This must be supported through different approaches to participant involvement, responsibility for real tasks in the co-creation process and facilitation of learning and partnerships between core and assisting practitioners.

8. Jensen, B., Hulpius, H., Režek, M., and Sousa, J. (2020). *Supporting the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners. Endline report of the VALUE project in 4 countries (BE, DK, PT, SL)*. Copenhagen, Denmark: DPU. <https://www.value-ecec.eu> and VALUE country reports in <https://www.value-ecec.eu/?p=3941>

The VALUE project has made clear that the choice of CPD pathways is closely linked to the country's context regarding ECEC. Furthermore, it was clear that these conditions must be met if we aim to strengthen ECEC in relation to the three core concepts – professional identity, collaboration, educare approach - and the interplay between them.

In this context, we stress the role and importance of leadership along with the need for increased participation of all professionals in learning pathways and integrated working environments.

## CHALLENGE 1

**Foster collaboration between stakeholders in the ECEC system with a view to raise awareness and develop locally rooted solutions.**

**«Stakeholders in the ECEC system have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations.»**

European Quality Framework for ECEC – Governance Arrangements 1

There is unquestionable evidence that the cross-sectorial nature of the ECEC system (independent of being a split or unified system) benefits from a collaborative culture and practice to enable and support high quality outcomes for children, families, and local communities.

To create a strong ECEC culture, it is essential to increase the levels of agency of professionals and school-level stakeholders to reclaim the discourse about 'what works to improve quality learning outcomes from the bottom-up, rather than the top-down'. This implies to base knowledge, curriculum and practice on ethical principles that guide all professionals, families, and policy makers.

## ACTION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

### Policy makers and research institutions

- ▶ Promote and invest in research initiatives focussing on ECEC professionalisation and staffing issues that can generate innovation.
- ▶ Promote active and systematic processes to collect school leaders, core and assisting practitioners and children voices perceiving them as reservoirs of innovation: invite all to listen, reflect, and self-discover the wisdom that lies among them.
- ▶ Define and implement more research to monitoring and evaluate the impact of education policies implemented in the field.

### ECEC institutions leadership

- ▶ Promote collaboration among core and assisting practitioners by developing concrete and regular opportunities to document, analyse their own practice, identify what has been effective and, in partnership with their colleagues and other stakeholders.
- ▶ Encourage family's participation on co-design the curriculum by involving them in planning, documenting and monitoring children development and learning.

## CHALLENGE 2

**Invest in professional development initiatives in which assisting, core practitioners and leaders collaborate on an equal footing.**

**«High quality ECEC requires well-qualified staff with initial and continuing training that enable them to fulfil their professional role.»**

European Quality Framework for ECEC – Quality Statement 3

Much more attention needs to be paid to the conditions for workplace-based learning in ECEC centres and for collaboration at the workplace during CPD activities: the allocation of time and place for these activities, acquiring external professional support/expertise, organising support for creating learning communities both within the centre and with other centres.

It is critical to build and reinforce professional identity. Often assisting practitioners are expected to carry out tasks with little or no systemic support. A much stronger collaboration between pre-service institutions and mentoring staff in the workplace is needed, as are training courses for mentors, remuneration for those in a mentoring position, and greater participation of the ECEC settings regarding competence development during the practical component in pre-service training.

This can raise awareness around the role of assisting practitioners and its meaning in relation with the roles of their other ECEC professionals.

## ACTION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

### Policy makers and training institutions

- ▶ Improve job mobility for assisting practitioners by developing and improving adapted pathways to qualification for assisting practitioners, making it possible to combine working and studying.
- ▶ Map existing pathways to qualification for assisting practitioners and identify obstacles for participation and possible solutions together with the ECEC workforce involved.
- ▶ Invest/increase funding in participatory action research approach to generate sustainable change based on evidence that can inform decision-making process at the ECEC system level (public policies).

### ECEC institutions leadership

- ▶ Enhance access for assisting practitioners to CPD by monitoring the participation of assisting practitioners in CPD and raising awareness around the importance of their role in education and care. Value a participatory approach, engaging assisting and core practitioners from the beginning.
- ▶ Provide equitable access to professional learning and mentorship opportunities. Get an external and/or internal facilitator who frames, organizes, and supports the process, ensuring that all staff participates on an equal footing.
- ▶ Improve participatory action research approach to generate motivation, commitment and sustainable learning and change based on evidence that can inform decision-making process at the ECEC centre level. For example, based on dialogues among the participants, and reflections on participants' diverse

- perspectives and on the real challenges they experience in practice.
- ▶ Promote strong democratic leadership at ECEC centre level which enables open and safe learning environments.<sup>9</sup>

### CHALLENGE 3

**Develop working conditions which strengthen the position and agency of assisting practitioners with low-level qualifications.**

**«High quality ECEC requires supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.»**

European Quality Framework for ECEC –  
Quality Statement 4

Five key issues impact both on attraction and retention of qualified staff and in professional identity of assisting practitioners which affects service quality and compromise severely equity, especially for the most vulnerable children and families:

- ▶ absence of a clear/suitable profile;
- ▶ disparity between salary and conditions;
- ▶ limited career prospects;
- ▶ lack of learning and professional

- ▶ development opportunities;
- ▶ community perceptions of assisting practitioners.

### ACTION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

#### Policy makers and training institutions

- ▶ Review staffing and qualification requirements for ECEC workforce under the *Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* to improve consistency and reduce risk of high turnover.
- ▶ Include in initial training collaborative models in ECEC, e.g. collaborative learning between training institutions for future assisting and core practitioners.
- ▶ Invest in intentional and long-term strategy to raise assisting practitioners' social recognition as ECEC key actors starting. Start to co-design with providers and professionals a coherent professional development policy which includes: (a) upskilling features (recognition of prior learning, evaluation, and recognition of legacy awards); (b) updated professional knowledge and competences; (c) career mobility and progression.

#### ECEC institutions leadership

- ▶ Provide clear job description for assisting practitioners, starting from an educare and collaborative approach.
- ▶ Evaluate job descriptions of core practitioners: to what extent educare and collaboration is included?
- ▶ Improve wages and a fair salary and performance appraisal policy.

- ▶ Improve working conditions namely time for planning and reflection. Evaluate timetables of ECEC staff (assisting and core practitioners). To what extent and how does timetables support or hinder collaboration (preparation, implementation, and evaluation of pedagogical activities) and participation in shared CPD for ECEC staff members with different professional roles and/or initial training?
- ▶ Invest in leadership programmes for ECEC leaders to support them in developing an organisational climate and structure supporting experimentation, collaboration and shared reflection.
- ▶ Raise awareness on the need for professionalisation and collaboration by promoting discussion on professionalisation and collaboration for ECEC assisting practitioners with different stakeholders. Think of policymakers of national, regional, local authorities, representatives of ECEC institutions, trade unions, trainers of initial and in-service training institutions, etc.

## WHY INVEST IN THESE RECOMMENDED ACTIONS?

### BENEFITS FOR THE ECEC SYSTEM

- ▶ Strengthened professional identity, defined as feeling more competent, better acknowledged, more involved in teams. All three elements are regarded as vital prerequisites for successful professional

- work with children and families, as well as for meaningful participation in team collaboration.
- ▶ Better communication among professionals and, consequently, more mutual learning, stronger relationships between colleagues and a stronger sense of shared identity. Important elements to manage the pedagogical challenges and dilemmas as experiences by professionals, that characterise complex everyday ECEC contexts.
- ▶ Shift in mindset towards a holistic educare approach, especially in ECEC systems where the holistic educare approach is quite new and unfamiliar. Such a shift might lead to feeling better equipped to address an educare approach, as well as a holistic way of working with learning, care and inclusion.<sup>10</sup>

### BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- ▶ Interactions with professionals who feel valued and motivated and view them as experts in providing the best education and care.
- ▶ Consistent education and care delivered by professionals with long-term experience with higher impact for the most vulnerable children.
- ▶ Inclusive, evidence-based programming that reflects up-to-date pedagogical approaches delivered by highly trained professionals.

9. Van der Mespel, S., Brazinha, M., Hulpia, H., Jensen, B., Marquard, M., Režek, M., Sousa, J. (2020). VALUE Roadmap. Pathways towards strengthening collaboration in early childhood education and care. Belgium: VBJK. <https://www.value-ececeu/?p=3958>

10. Jensen, B., Hulpia, H., Režek, M., and Sousa, J. (2020). Supporting the collaboration between ECEC core and assisting practitioners. Endline report of the VALUE project in 4 countries (BE, DK, PT, SL). Copenhagen, Denmark: DPU. <https://www.value-ececeu>

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