

Towards Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care. Implications for Policy and Practice

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Introduction

There is a broad consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that the quality of early childhood services depend on well-educated, experienced and 'competent' staff. But what exactly makes a competent early childhood practitioner? How can *competence* be understood, and its development supported, in the highly complex and demanding field of working with young children, families and communities? What approaches do different countries take, and what lessons can be learnt from practices developed by practitioners, training institutions and policy-makers across Europe? This article presents the findings of a European research project conducted by the University of East London (UEL) and the University of Ghent (UGent)¹. The study on 'competence requirements in early childhood education and care' (CoRe) explored conceptualisations of 'competence' and professionalism in early childhood practice and identified systemic conditions for developing, supporting and maintaining competence at all layers of the early childhood system. The European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture commissioned the research conducted between January 2010 and May 2011. In the light of the findings and intensive consultation with key stakeholders in ECEC in Europe, CoRe developed *policy recommendations*. The CoRe research team was supported by an international expert advisory team and collaborated with three European and international professional networks (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET), International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and Children in Europe (CiE)) which represent the field of ECEC in all EU27 Member States and candidate countries. In addition, a fourth international network (Education International) brought its strong workforce and teaching unions' perspective. Locally-based but internationally renowned researchers provided critical insights into the policies of their countries and case studies of practices in different European locations. The aim of CoRe was to provide policy-relevant information, advice and case studies with regard to the competences required for the ECEC workforce and support competence development from a systemic perspective. In this article, we present the findings of the different but interrelated strands of the research process which underpin the policy recommendations regarding systemic competence development and professionalisation in early childhood education and care in Europe. By providing informed views on the questions at stake we hope to initiate discussion, provoke new thinking, and encourage asking new and critical questions.

Project Rationale and Research Approach

The CoRe team conducted a study grounded in international research on quality, competences and professionalism in early childhood. Recommendations for action

at the various layers of the early childhood system, including the level of European policy, were developed. The analysis of the literature, together with experiences gathered in the case studies and the survey of competence profiles for the ECEC workforce enabled us to ‘map’ areas of policy and practice where action should be taken. These were discussed with key actors in the field (as represented by the collaborators of this project) and have led to recommendations for policy and practice to:

- promote professionalism in early childhood across all layers of the professional system, including practice, management, qualification and training, and research
- improve pre- and in-service training of the ECEC workforce
- develop an understanding of qualification requirements for the ECEC workforce that shares common values and respects the diversity of approaches to realise them across Europe.

CoRe adopted a multi-method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) in three project stages that mutually informed each other: a *literature review* of international policy documents and academic publications, a *survey* among experts in this field in 15 EU countries, and seven *in-depth case studies*.

Definition of Key Terms

In exploring the relationship between *professionalisation* and *quality* in early childhood, CoRe inevitably deals with terms and concepts that are key to the academic and policy debate in the field, but highly contested. How to understand, define, develop and evaluate the *quality* of provision is one of these contested terms (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, *professionalism* — more specifically who the professionals are and how they acquire their professionalism — has different meanings according to background and perspective (and vested interest) in the debate (Urban, 2010). It is therefore necessary to provide working definitions of how *quality*, and being and becoming *professional* are understood in the context of this study:

Quality of Provision — Systemic, Dynamic and Processual

Current EU early childhood education and care policies recognise that the provision must be of high quality to be effective (European Commission, 2011, Eurydice, 2009). But what constitutes high quality in ECEC is a complex, and often contradictory matter (Penn, 2009). A rich body of literature provides evidence of an ongoing international debate that, since the 1990s, has argued about the aspects of the quality construct, how they are related, and how they can best be evaluated and developed (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, 2007; Pence & Moss, 1994; Penn, 2011). Any discussion about quality in ECEC should encompass the regular review of understandings and practices to improve services in ever-changing societal conditions (Penn, 2009). Hence, quality needs to be considered as a continuous *process*. OECD has been a main actor in drawing attention to the importance of quality early childhood services and systems. The *Starting Strong* reports (OECD, 2001, 2006) place the question of quality in the context of democratic ECEC governance and suggests a multi-dimensional approach to understanding, developing and assessing quality that takes into account the perspective of all stakeholders (OECD, 2006, pp. 127–129).

Our working definition of quality strongly supports this view. From our *systemic* perspective, we argue that the acknowledgement of the importance of the *actors*

(practitioners, children, families etc.) and their interactions to establish *quality* on a day-to-day basis requires emphasis on its relational and processual aspects. Hence, we consider *quality* to be a *multi-dimensional* and generic construct. It unfolds — and must be proactively developed — in at least five dimensions:

- *experiences of and outcomes for children* (e.g. of belonging, involvement, well-being, meaning-making, achievement)
- *experiences of parents and carers* (e.g. of belonging, involvement, well-being and meaning-making, but also accessibility and affordability)
- *interactions* (e.g. between adults and children, between children, between practitioners and parents, between team members, but also between institutions, ECEC and local communities, professions, practice, research, professional preparation and governance)
- *structural conditions* (adult/child ratio, group size, space, environment, play materials, but also paid ‘non-contact’ time, continuous professional development, support for practitioner research and critically reflective practice)
- *systems of evaluation, monitoring and quality improvement* (e.g. internal and external evaluation, systematically including the views of all stakeholders, initiated and supported by service providers and local or central authorities).

A systemic, dynamic and processual definition of quality and an emphasis on dialogue and negotiation neither open the way to unconditional relativism (‘anything goes’) nor lose sight of ‘outcomes’. We insist that outcomes (for children, families, communities and the broader society) are crucial. They will be found in each of the dimensions outlined above and must be systematically evaluated and documented, but most important, they cannot be predetermined without negotiation with all stakeholders.

This conceptualisation of *quality* encompasses ‘values, implicit ideologies, subjective perceptions and social constructions reflecting different cultures [. . .] experiences, academic traditions, social needs and expectations’ (Bondioli & Ghedini, 2000). Quality needs to be conceptualised as a result of constant negotiation between all actors involved in ECEC institutions (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996b). Universal, decontextualised approaches tend to result in technocratic and managerial procedures that are not appropriate for the complexity of early childhood professional practice. However ‘while we need to remain critical about *quality* and its implications for practice, in a broader policy context, arguing for *better quality* can be an effective driving force’ (Urban, 2008, p. 138). The CoRe study relates the concept of *quality* to professionalism. We emphasise that it is linked to the *economic, social and educational* functions of ECEC and unfolds at all four levels of a *competent ECEC system*.

Professionals and Practitioners

Titles, job descriptions and profiles of those working with young children and families vary widely across Europe (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010) and there is a corresponding variety of services and qualifications. Job titles include teachers, teaching assistants, educators, child care workers, with many variations, even within one country (Adams, 2005). We generally subsume the different roles in the term *practitioner*, which includes all those who work in ECEC settings that provide non-parental education and care for children under compulsory school age. These

services include childcare centres, nurseries, nursery schools, kindergartens, various types of age-integrated centres and family day care provided by home-based workers (who were not included in this study). However, in relation to a specific category of practitioner in one country, we refer as much as possible to the original term used in this country.

Becoming Professional: Practitioner Education

Practitioner education in the context of the CoRe study refers to any form of professional preparation and continuous learning that enhance the competence of early childhood practitioners and which are usually referred to as *training*, a term which often conveys limited meanings of professional preparation and development. As Oberhuemer (2005, p. 7) notes, the term has ‘increasingly taken on a technical, competencies-and-skills connotation in the educational field and fails to do justice to the wider reaching aims of professionalisation as identified by the research community’. The ‘technical connotations’ of training point to a ‘particular concept of learning through instruction, repetitive practice, etc., it is about acquiring skills to deliver technologies. [. . .] Its connotations contradict the very essence of professional and educational practice as a transformative practice of mutual dependence and respect, co-construction and shared meaning making between human beings’ (Urban, 2008, p. 150). Our definition emphasises the transformative potential of professional practices which are constantly co-constructed, de-constructed and reconstructed in the relationships with children, families and local communities. We use *practitioner education* as a generic term that includes *initial professional preparation* (qualifying or not qualifying professionalising routes before being involved in practice) and *continuing professional development* (in-service courses, team supervision, tutoring, pedagogical guidance, counselling. . .).

Methodology

The findings of the CoRe study are drawn from two data sources:

- a 15-country survey (Urban *et al.*, 2011b, p. 40)
- a series of seven free-standing but related case studies (*ibid*, p. 78)

Using a semi-structured questionnaire (*ibid*, appendix 1), the respondents were asked to provide information about policy frameworks, regulations and guidelines for initial professional preparation at various levels and other official documents that outline requirements for, and expectations towards practitioners working with young children from birth to compulsory school age in early childhood education and care settings. In countries where official competence requirements exist, we refer to them as ‘professional competence profiles’ and ‘competence profiles for initial training’². Respondents were also asked to provide information about systemic aspects relating to the different types of practitioners, e.g. adult/child ratio, professional support system, non-contact time, salaries and trade unions. A subjective **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats** (SWOT) analysis complemented the factual information.

Arguably, most of this information could have been gathered through desk research carried out by members of the CoRe team. We deliberately chose to involve local research partners because the factual information in published documents can only provide limited insights into the actual implications of the emerging ‘competence profiles’ for day-to-day practice in early childhood settings and

professional preparation. In order to explore and document what the formal conceptualisation of the early childhood workforce, as expressed in the documents, means for practitioners, institutions and the early childhood system in its entirety we needed an *informed interpretation* more than a mere listing of policy documents.

The country reports provided the raw data for a *thematic analysis* which identified overarching themes and links between different country reports, and an interpretive, *phenomenological analysis* which allowed us to identify *fields of tension* across all reports (see *Research Findings* below).

The case studies were also conducted in close collaboration with locally-based but internationally experienced researchers. The selection of authors ensured that the individual case studies were firmly grounded in the local context but linked to the European and wider international context.

The following case forms the sample for the study:

TABLE I.

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Professional preparation of Éducateurs Jeunes Enfants (EJE) and apprenticeship for auxiliaires de puériculture</i> | Ecole Santé Sociale Sud Est — Lyon, France |
| <i>The Integrated Qualifications Framework and the Early Years Professional Status: a shift towards a graduate led workforce</i> | England |
| <i>Pedagogical Guidance as pathway to professionalization</i> | City of Ghent, Belgium |
| <i>Inter-professional collaboration in pre-school and primary school contexts</i> | Slovenia |
| <i>The Danish Pedagogue Education: principles, understandings and transformations of a generalist approach to professionalism</i> | Paedagoguddannelsen JYDSK, VIA University College — Denmark |
| <i>Origins and evolution of professionalism in the context of municipal ECEC institutions</i> | City of Pistoia, Italy |
| <i>Professional and competence development in the context of the “Where there are no preschools” (WTANP) project</i> | Poland |

The *purposive sample* (Robson, 2002) for the CoRe study covers a wide range of institutional models and understandings of professionalism and competences. Three dimensions that affect the degree of professionalism and levels of competence in early childhood practice across Europe (Oberhuemer, 2005; Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010; OECD, 2006; Peeters, 2008) enabled us to organise the complexity:

1. ECEC services tend to be organised in either *split* or *integrated* systems. In split systems, services for the youngest children (childcare, usually from birth to age three or four) are separate from pre-school or early education programmes, usually under the auspices of different government departments (social welfare/education). Other countries have integrated services for children under compulsory school age either in the education system or in a broader pedagogical system (Bennett, 2005). Professionalism in ECEC tends to flourish in integrated systems, yet there are interesting examples in some split systems (e.g. the *éducateur jeunes enfants* in France).
2. Countries tend to take two approaches to defining professionalism in ECEC. In Europe there is a choice between a *generic* or a *specialist* conceptualisation

(Cameron & Moss, 2007). *Generic* professionalism is based on holistic approaches and usually emphasises interactional, situational and relational aspects of the work instead of the performance of concrete tasks (e.g. as defined in a prescriptive curriculum). Generic ECEC professionals are often qualified to work with a wide age range and in various institutional contexts. The Danish *Pedagog* is a very good example. In the *specialist* model, practitioners are qualified to work with specific age groups in specific settings (e.g. crèche, pre-school, *école maternelle*). In both models, specialist professionals are often supported by assistants who are qualified at a lower level (and, in some cases, have no formal qualification at all).

3. Formal qualification levels and requirements differ. There are examples of high-quality services with staff qualified at secondary level — usually in systems where continuous professional guidance and/or development are provided — e.g. the Northern Italian cities of Reggio Emilia and Pistoia (*pedagogisti*). Similar approaches have been introduced in a number of countries/regions, e.g. in Ghent (*pedagogisch coach*) and Germany (*Fachberater*). Other countries have been seeking to link quality improvements to higher (tertiary) levels of qualification. Some examples are the Swedish *lärare*, the Danish *pedagog*, the Belgian *kleuterleider*, the Slovenian *vzgojitelj*. Some countries (e.g. France, England) are opening qualification pathways for practitioners with lower qualifications in order to enable them to acquire secondary or tertiary (BA) levels within the European Qualification Framework.

We consider the diversity of models across Europe and the wealth of experience in largely different social and institutional contexts to be a major asset for the development of high-quality services for children and young families (Urban, 2010). The picture, however, is complex and therefore forbids simplistic comparison. The selected cases are by no means representative. They do, however, represent social constructions and understandings that need to be contextualised and *localised* in order for us to learn from their success (Rosenfeld & Sykes, 1998). In other words, any research in highly complex systems, aiming at developing an understanding of *what is actually going on, why, and for whom* needs to embrace the *messiness* of its subject and reflect the *spatialised* nature of knowledge in this field which is ‘motley’ (Urban, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, and in this issue).

CoRe Research Findings

Formal Competence Requirements — A Diverse Scenario

Not surprisingly, formal competence requirements for early childhood practitioners vary widely across Europe, in line with the diversity of early childhood systems, institutions, traditions and professional roles. While there are countries with formal competence requirements for both the profession and initial professional preparation at national level, others only have requirements for either the profession or professional preparation, raising questions of consistency between different aspects of the ECEC system (professional preparation, employment requirements, national curricula, etc.). Some countries have no formal competence requirements or profiles at all. The existence of a competence profile is generally of advantage for the development of an early childhood education and care system — but only if it avoids being overly prescriptive and narrow. Broader definitions of ‘competence’ that point to a body of knowledge and outline more generic skills provide

orientation, but require local, context specific interpretation. This facilitates experimentation, participation and professional autonomy and can lead to more appropriate responses to local needs. The relationship between competence requirements driven by the labour market and the need for experimentation, creativity, innovation and knowledge development in the field and in professional preparation (e.g. in universities and training colleges) points to another *field of tension*: professional preparation that aims at meeting the demands of the labour market, especially in countries with a dominance of private provision, is unlikely to challenge prevailing practices and conceptualisations of what an early childhood professional should be, and will promote *more of the same* approaches to professionalisation instead. Hence, there is little acknowledgement of the role of professional preparation as a site for research, critical reflection and innovation.

The CoRe case studies show the importance of building reciprocal relationships with parents and communities in diverse contexts. However, formal competence profiles tend to focus on working with children only, which leads to a mismatch with the day-to-day demands on practitioners (Van Laere, 2012). There is little recognition of the systemic nature of early childhood practice in these profiles. This is in contrast to a broad consensus in the CoRe case studies, and supported by international literature, that a focus on individual practitioners alone will not increase the overall quality of provision. Other measures and support systems are necessary. They include appropriate staffing, time for shared reflection and planning and continuous pedagogical support.

Invisible Assistants

The great diversity of the European early childhood workforce has been described by such studies as SEEPRO (Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010) and *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001, 2006). The CoRe survey and case studies confirm this diversity against a background of different traditions, histories and institutional forms of early childhood education in European countries. A critical issue, however, is that the picture presented in international reports tends to focus on the core professional, or the graduate part of the early childhood workforce. Assistant or auxiliary staff, working alongside the core professionals, remain largely *invisible* although they provide as much as 50% of the workforce in some countries. Katrien Van Laere *et al.* explore the implications in their contribution to this issue of the Journal (pp. 527–541).

Systemic Approaches to Professionalisation

The CoRe survey depicts fragmented approaches to professionalisation, with competence profiles, where they exist, aiming mostly at individual practitioners, and neglecting large parts of the European early childhood workforce. These findings should be read in the light of a perspective that is widely shared by our respondents, i.e. that additional support systems at various layers of the early childhood system are needed to increase the overall quality of provision. The case studies are exemplars of systemic, albeit very different approaches. The examples of municipal support systems (e.g. Pistoia, Ghent) demonstrate how continuous pedagogical support, with a focus on collegiality and solidarity within and across teams of practitioners can raise the level of competence and quality of practice regardless of formal qualifications. Other examples show how a combination of workplace learning, supported study and the recognition of prior experience can

open access to higher education to formally unqualified practitioners. This is demonstrated at local level by the case of ESSSE (Lyon, France) (qualification for *éducateurs de jeunes enfants* and *auxiliaires de puériculture*) and at national level by the English case study (Urban *et al.*, 2011b, pp. 75–108). The case studies conducted as part of CoRe are all embedded in their particular, often local context, which forbids simple comparison. There is, however, a general lesson to be learnt. It is the need for a radical re-thinking and re-invention of professional development for early childhood practitioners. Successful initiatives are embedded in a coherent system of continuous professional development that is focused on transformative practice. A key characteristic of successful systemic approaches to professionalisation is their ability to recognise and build on practitioners' prior and every-day experience (e.g. *analyse de pratique*, critical reflection) and to support peer learning and 'intergenerational' learning.

Towards Competent Systems

Competence — a Systemic Redefinition

The quality of ECEC depends on the competence of people working with children, families and communities. A key finding of CoRe is that 'competence' in the early childhood education and care context must be understood as a characteristic of the entire early childhood system. Often, we associate the term with the qualities of an individual practitioner, as something that can be acquired through training (i.e. the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivation . . .). The problem with this concept is that it is rather narrow. Especially in the English language context, 'being competent' (a human attribute) is often reduced to 'competencies' — a series of skills and pieces of knowledge that individuals need to 'possess' to perform a particular task. The predominantly English-language early childhood research literature often focuses on a rather narrow conceptualisation of 'education' understood as formalised learning, with less value given to 'care' or the inseparable connection between the two aspects of practice (Urban *et al.*, 2011a, pp. 21–22). Approaches outside the limitations of the English language (e.g. the German concept of *Bildung*, the Danish concept of *social pedagogy* and the Italian concept of *collegialità*) allow for more holistic and systemic understandings of professional competence.

We framed our approach to understanding competence with a holistic understanding of early childhood education and care — as *education in the broadest sense*. This, we argue, inevitably leads to a broad and holistic understanding of competence and competence requirements to work in this field.

A *competent system* develops in reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context. A key feature is its support for individuals to realise their capability to develop responsible and responsive practices that meet the needs of children and families in ever-changing societal contexts (Urban *et al.*, 2011b, pp 15–17). At the level of the individual practitioner, 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 professional *values*. Although the 'knowledge' and 'practice' are critical, practitioners and teams also need *reflective competences* as they work in highly complex, unpredictable and diverse contexts. A *competent system* requires possibilities for *all* staff to engage in joint learning and critical reflection. This includes

sufficient *paid* time for these activities. A *competent system* includes collaborations between individuals and teams, and institutions (pre-schools, schools, support services for children and families), and *competent governance* at policy level.

The reviewed literature, survey, case studies and consultations in this project show that competence unfolds in four dimensions, at every layer of the ECEC system:

1. Individual level
2. Institutional and team level
3. Inter-institutional level
4. Level of governance

Brought together in a coherent framework, *competence* at each of these four layers characterises a *competent system*. This conceptualisation extends the traditional understanding of competence (as an individual property) to the institutional and governance domain, a view that is supported by the literature (Timar & Kirp, 1991) and by the OECD DeSeCo project (OECD, 2005). Hence, our understanding of competence moves beyond the acquisition of knowledge and training of skills to embrace reflectiveness as its core. It expands the traditional understanding of competence — usually defined in terms of *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes* — to embrace the complexity that characterises educational practice.

Competence, we argue, unfolds in the dimensions of *knowledge*, *practices* and *values* that are relevant at all layers of the system. By referring to *practices* instead of skills we distance ourselves from a technical conceptualisation of educational practice (*do I do things right?*) and move towards its reflective nature (*do I do the right things?*) (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2010). By referring to *values* instead of attitudes we distance ourselves from an individualised conceptualisation of ECEC purposes and move towards a vision of early childhood education underpinned by *negotiated goals* and *collective aspirations*. Within this framework, competences are intentionally rather than explicitly listed: the interplay of knowledge, practices and values can generate different practices and approaches according to countries and cultural contexts. The fundamental *values* expressed by recent European documents constitute the common ground on which the collective aspirations of a local community can flourish. A solid base of *knowledge*, building upon academic research and practical experience, represents a starting-point to develop local practice-based research and critical reflection. Examples of competent *practices* are provided to encourage local experimentalism. Although detailed examples of the dimensions of competence (*knowledge*, *practices* and *values*) at different levels of the early childhood system were included in the CoRe report (Urban *et al.*, 2011a, pp. 35–45), they are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, we offer them as a source for inspiration. Table II shows how *knowledge*, *practices* and *values* permeate all levels of a *competent system*. The items are excerpts from a much more detailed table in the CoRe document (Urban *et al.*, 2011a, pp. 35–45).

Systemic Conditions for Competent Systems

Competent systems in early childhood do not emerge out of aspiration alone. If competence is to unfold in reciprocal relationships between actors at all levels of the system, certain conditions must be in place across the entire system. Brought together in a coherent framework, they render early childhood education and care

TABLE II.

| Dimensions of competent systems (examples) | | Knowledge | Practices | Values |
|--|---|---|---|--------|
| Individuals | Knowledge of various developmental aspects of children from a holistic perspective [...] | Building strong pedagogical relationships with children, based on sensitive responsiveness [...] | Adopting a holistic vision of education that encompasses learning, care and upbringing [...] | |
| | Knowledge of working with parents and local communities (knowledge about families, poverty and diversity) [...] | Analysing needs of local communities in order to work effectively with parents and disadvantaged groups [...] | Adopting a democratic and inclusive approach to the education of young children in order to sustain social cohesion [...] | |
| Institutions and teams | Knowledge of situated learning and 'communities of practice' [...] | Shared pedagogical frameworks to orient practitioners' work Arrange paid time for documentation, reflexion and planning for all staff Framework for professional development [...] | Democracy and respect for diversity Understanding of professional development as continuous learning process that encompasses personal and professional growth Understanding ECEC institutions as sites of civil engagement | |
| | Knowledge of inter-agency collaboration Knowledge of community development Cross-disciplinary knowledge(pegagogy, health, social policy ...) [...] | Networking and systematic collaboration between ECEC institutions, primary schools, services for families, research and training institutions [...] | Interdisciplinarity and interprofessionalism Democracy and respect for diversity [...] | |
| Governance | Children's rights Diversity in all its forms and anti-discriminatory practice Comprehensive strategies for tackling poverty and inequality [...] | Providing adequate resources to ensure equitable access to high quality ECEC for all children and families Integrated approaches to ECEC at local, regional and national level Supporting systemic professionalisation [...] | Children's right to active participation in society Children's right to develop their full potential Education as a public good and public responsibility [...] | |

a deeply democratic practice at the core of society. We argue with John Dewey that the key to enabling such practices lies in the ‘faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished’ (Dewey, 1939, p. 227). We suggest six categories of conditions:

1. *ECEC as a public good*

Early childhood education is a public good rather than a commodity. Competent systems require democratic governance built on consultation with key stakeholders, particularly at local level (see Lazzari in this issue). High levels of professionalism are more difficult to achieve in predominantly private and marketised ECEC environments where private investment (in appropriate salaries and professional development) is often restricted and there tends to be a lack of continuity between (professionalisation) initiatives at various levels of the system.

2. *Curricula and competence profiles*

There is a close connection between systemic professional competence and curriculum development. National curricula and pedagogical frameworks for competent systems set out values, purposes and overarching goals of ECEC in a society without being prescriptive. These are then interpreted and co-constructed with stakeholders locally. General pedagogical frameworks at national level also contribute to coherence and integration of professional preparation and development and collegial learning. A curriculum, however, is only one component of a necessary policy framework that ensures that the following aspects are in place and connected:

- *A curriculum framework*, addressing overall goals, principles and competences for working with young children from birth to at least compulsory school age, regardless of the institutional setting.
- *A qualification framework* addressing professional preparation and 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 that 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 (e.g. municipal, regional, national) and linking early childhood policies to a wider context (e.g. education, welfare, citizenship, equality).

3. *Employment and working conditions*

Precarious work conditions, which are the reality for early childhood practitioners in many countries, and in particular for those working with the youngest and most vulnerable children, impede individual learning and, therefore, professionalisation of the entire field. Policies to increase professionalisation that focus only on initial professional preparation, without addressing employment and work conditions, have proven to 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 professionalism. Working

conditions for individual practitioners are a key factor in developing a *competent system* (Early *et al.*, 2007). Regarding work regulations, policies that guarantee decent wages (e.g. pay parity with primary school teachers) 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 in the institution and in other services.

4. *Unitary systems and generic professionalisation*

The constant need to coordinate policies between different government departments with fragmented responsibilities for aspects of 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 tends to lead to more coherent policies, greater professionalism, higher qualification requirements and better wages (OECD, 2006, Kaga *et al.*, 2010). The findings of our study also suggest that the content of ECEC is deepened when professionals are generic, rather than specialised in one field of work or one specific age group. In the Danish case, the preparation of the *paedagog* entails a focus on broad competences, enabling them to work in welfare organisations for all ages. In the case of ESSSE, the future *éducateurs jeunes enfants* work in several socio-pedagogical settings for young children and their parents.

5. *Support structures and continuous pedagogical support*

Coherent support and professional development policies can effectively increase competence at team level and result in high levels of professionalism even in teams with low-qualified practitioners. Investments in continuous pedagogical support can have a strong impact on the quality of ECEC services, as they lead to continuous professional development of the workforce. There is substantial evidence that investment in initial professional preparation is cost-effective if complemented by a coherent policy on professional development, supported by specifically qualified staff (e.g. *pedagogistas*, *pedagogical coordinators* or *advisers*). Continuous professional development, accompanied by specially qualified staff needs to take place over extended periods of time and to be focused on transforming collective and individual practices.

6. *Addressing the gender gap*

The Care Work in Europe project (Cameron & Moss, 2007) has shown that it is imperative to overcome the notion that care work is 'what women naturally do' and address the gender gap in the ECEC workforce. The SEEPRO project shows that this is still very far from the reality, given the extremely low percentage of men in ECEC. Experts agree that the number of men working in ECEC must rise to 10% (Cameron & Moss, 2007, European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996a, Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010).

The case study on the Danish *paedagog* can be of some inspiration. The generic approach (which qualifies students to work across a variety of educational settings) and the recognition of students' previous work experiences have contributed to attract more men into the ECEC field in Denmark than in any other EU Member State.

From Research to Action: CoRe policy recommendations

The policy recommendations developed by CoRe cannot be read in isolation. While bringing a specific focus on systemic approaches to professionalisation in ECEC, they build on previous research and policy reports that document an overwhelming consensus about the necessary preconditions for achieving sustainable quality improvements in services for young children. A key document is the 1996 *Quality targets in services for young children* (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996a) which provides a set of 40 ‘targets’ (which were deemed achievable within a 10-year time frame at the date of publication), addressing necessary conditions and responsibilities across all layers of the ECEC system, including a focus on adequate public investment. Other key documents include the EPPE study (Sylva *et al.*, 2004), the OECD *Starting Strong I+II* reports (OECD, 2001, 2006), the ‘Children in Europe Policy Paper’ (Children in Europe, 2008), the UNICEF ‘Report Card 8’ (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008), the NESSE report on early childhood policies in Europe (Penn, 2009), a Eurydice review focusing on early childhood and inequality (Eurydice, 2009) and the ‘Care work in Europe’ and SEEPRO studies (Cameron & Moss, 2007, Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010). Albeit different in scope and focus, these reports agree on key issues that need to be addressed in order to enhance the quality of ECEC:

- Adequate public investment (at least 1% of GDP)
- Staff/child ratios
- Group size
- Working conditions (pay parity between qualified ECEC staff and primary school teachers)
- Retention / staff turnover
- High share of graduates (60% with at least ISCED 5A or BA level qualifications).

The importance of these preconditions is clearly supported by our findings. Considering the long standing recommendation to increase the number of degree-level graduates in the early childhood workforce, we also point to a EU Commission document on ‘Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications’ (European Commission, 2005) in which (school) teaching is seen as a graduate profession at Masters Level. There can, in principle, be no justification for applying different (i.e. lower) standards to the early childhood profession. From a systemic perspective, it should be added that *inclusive* professionalisation needs *diversification* as well as a *general increase* of formal qualifications. This means that the full range of qualifications, including MA and doctoral level must be available to the ECEC profession.

Core Recommendations at Regional and National Level

In order to move towards *competent systems* in ECEC, existing policy recommendations must be implemented. However, findings from our study show that additional factors need to be taken into account if the development of the ECEC system is to be *sustainable* and *systemic*. From the analysis of the CoRe case studies, and supported by the literature review, we identified six areas for policy intervention at local, regional and national levels of ECEC systems:

1. Systematic collaboration between ECEC settings and Higher and Further Education institutions for initial and continuous professional preparation in order to ensure **equal and reciprocal relationships between theory and practice** in both learning environments and support critical reflection as a core professional competence.
2. Investment in **leadership capacity** at all layers of the system to address the increasingly complex task of working with young children, families and communities in diverse and unequal contexts. 'It is of key importance that school leaders are not overburdened with administrative tasks and concentrate on essential matters, such as quality of learning, the curriculum, pedagogical issues and staff performance, motivation and development' (Council of Europe, 2009, p. 3).
3. While there will be different starting points for developing ECEC policies according to regional and national contexts, it should be recognised that developing a *competent early childhood system* requires policies that **effectively address the entire ECEC system**.
4. The quality of services and the competence level of staff depend on, but are not only the result of individual professional preparation. Our case studies identify successful pathways to professionalisation and show the beneficial effects of comprehensive, long-term in-service professional development. Short-term in-service courses are not sufficient. This requires a fundamental **re-thinking of professional development** in most countries.
5. For many practitioners, a career in early childhood education and care is still a 'dead-end job' with little possibility or incentive to move into a more responsible or senior position. Both the acute recruitment crisis in many European countries and the need to maintain expertise in the system require policies to **increase both vertical and horizontal job mobility**. This can be supported through accreditation of in-service professional development and prior learning or through close collaboration between practice settings and higher education institutions.
6. Much more attention needs to be paid to the role of assistant staff. Our findings show that a large proportion of the ECEC workforce in many EU countries has no or considerably low formal qualifications and very limited access to continuous professional development. Policies for professionalisation and mobility need to **include assistants** and systematically target underrepresented groups (e.g. members of ethnic, cultural, linguistic minorities and marginalised groups) to ensure their access to professional qualifications.

Developing Competent Systems — An active Role for the EU

Early childhood education and care takes place in local settings and with local communities, and there clearly is a role for policy-making at regional and national level. While the European Union has no immediate powers to govern education or welfare practices in its Member States, it has an important role to play. EU policy documents and actions set the scene for recognising early childhood education and care as an effective tool to achieve ambitious policy goals, e.g. social inclusion, poverty reduction and socio-economic development. Recent EU policy documents which outline these include the EU 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010), and the EU Commission communication on 'Early childhood education and care' (European Commission, 2011). One of the most important contributions the EU can make is to continue to promote early childhood education and care as a *public*

good and as an integral part of the education systems of its Member States. Framed by these EU policy strategies and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Union, 2000), the EU can promote free and universal access to high quality ECEC, with specific resources directed to the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Using these policies and shared goals as a platform, the EU can — and should — initiate, encourage and actively support discussions within and across Member States about purpose, values and goals of education, including early childhood education. The European Commission has two main levers to achieve this: exchange of early childhood education and care policies and practices can be supported by introducing it as a specific theme within the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), and transnational critical learning communities of practitioners, policy maker and researchers can be supported through specific activities within the Lifelong Learning programme. More specifically, CoRe recommends that the following actions should be taken by the EU:

- The Commission should work towards a European framework for quality of early childhood provision. Quality indicators developed within this framework should have a specific (but not exclusive) focus on the workforce and systemic approaches to professionalisation
- In dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders, the Commission should develop guidelines to support Member States in their implementation of research and policy recommendations
- Good practice examples for *competent systems* (similar to the cases documented by CoRe) should be documented and disseminated to ensure they are accessible to policy makers and practitioners
- Research that is conscious of, and relevant to the contexts of European ECEC should be supported through existing (e.g. FP7) and new funding streams
- The wealth of European research, literature and debate that exists beyond the English language world should be made accessible
- Transnational and multidimensional networks and critical learning communities of practitioners, parents, local and national policy makers and researchers should be systematically encouraged, funded and supported.

Conclusion

Investment in high quality early childhood education and care has long been recognised as a key to realising the ambitious socio-economic policy goals set by the EU. In recent years, the socio-economic argument — childcare places for working parents — has been complemented by the recognition that participation in high quality early childhood education and care is beneficial for children, families and society as a whole. It is one of the most effective ways to ensure democratic participation in society for *all* children and families, but particularly for the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Early childhood education and care provides a crucial space, in any society, for the *micro-* and *macro-politics* to meet and constantly re-negotiate the relationship between the *private* and the *public* sphere. It is to be welcomed that European policies towards young children that used to be highly fragmented are beginning to converge. ‘Care’ and ‘education’ are finally seen as inseparable. Every child’s *right to education* and participation in society, every parent’s right (entitlement!) to support and reconcile ‘employment and family responsibilities’ (as indicated in the title of the EU Commission childcare network of the 1990s), and the need of our societies to draw on every citizen’s talent and

active contribution are beginning to be seen as aspects of the same broad picture. It is to be welcomed, too, that European policy documents explicitly acknowledge the key role of the early childhood workforce to achieve the ambitious goals. The ‘quality’ of early childhood services depends on those who, on a day to day basis, work with young children, families and communities.

CoRe has shown that the formal level of qualification of staff is an important factor for the quality of services as well as for the level of professionalism and competence. It is, however, not the only one, as we have clearly demonstrated. *Competence* is more than the sum of the individual practitioner’s *knowledge, skills* and *attitudes*. At its best, it unfolds in reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and governance in the early childhood system. The conceptual shift from a focus on the individual practitioner (who needs to be *skilled, trained* and *professionalised*) towards what we suggest calling a *competent system* has obvious implications: no longer can the institutional and organisational environment of early childhood practitioners be neglected. Critically reflective practitioners need work environments that are responsive to critical reflection and offer scope for change. There are, of course, immense opportunities arising from this precondition for *competent systems*. The most important ones, we suggest, are *democratic* and *epistemological* in nature. Competent systems require — and encourage — democratic governance, i.e. policies that provide stable frameworks for democratic participation and experimentation (Moss & Urban, 2010). As discussed in this article, they also require a redefinition of our professional epistemology — *how we know what we know* about early childhood — and how and by whom the professional body of knowledge is produced. Reconceptualised from the perspective of a critical ecology (Dalli & Urban, 2010), the traditional hierarchy between sites of knowledge production (universities, research), knowledge transmission (training colleges, professional preparation) and knowledge application (practice) is no longer tenable. Instead, a competent system produces situated knowledge (Osberg & Biesta, 2007) and critical understanding through the contributions of *all* actors, including practitioners, parents and children at every level of the system. If brought together in a systematic way, the move towards competent systems offers a true possibility for a radical *democratic* and *epistemological* renewal of public education.

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NOTES

1. This article is based on the summary report of the CoRe project, presented to the European Commission in September 2011, and launched at the international CoRe conference in Brussels, Belgium, 7th October 2011 (Urban, M., Vandebroek, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A. & Peeters, J. (2011a).
2. **Professional competence profiles:** official regulations and/or national/regional policy documents about the competences that are required for work in ECEC institutions (0–6-year-olds). **Competence profiles for initial training:** formal guidelines at national/regional policy level for training institutions delivering initial and qualifying training for the future early years workforce. They include competence requirements. They do not focus on descriptions of the content of the training such as curricula, listings of subjects or study materials, but on the competences that students should acquire.

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