



# TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

## The early years workforce: A review of European research and good practices on working with children from poor and migrant families

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### Introduction

Professional development is a critical measure to meet the dual challenge of providing generalised equitable access to ECEC, while retaining the quality of provision. This is also recognised by the EU in its 2011 Council Conclusions on ECEC, 2011<sup>1</sup>. This paper elaborates on recent studies in European Member States and provides insights on successful strategies for ECEC workforce professionalization to include and serve children from low income and migrant families. The paper draws on the research findings of a study on ECEC staff competence requirements, commissioned by the European Commission DG Education and Culture (Urban, Vandebroeck et al, 2011<sup>2</sup>) **and makes use of literature from various EU countries as well as in-depth case studies**. These analyses were also complemented with contributions from recent European projects such as the *Working for Inclusion Programme*<sup>3</sup> and the study *ECEC in promoting educational attainment including social development of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and in fostering social inclusion*<sup>4</sup>.

Four central questions are treated:

- What competences do professionals need to work with children from low income and migrant families?
- What kind of initial professional preparation is needed?
- What kind of continuing professional development is needed?
- What kind of governance is needed?

<sup>1</sup> <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/11/st09/st09424.en11.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> CoRe - Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care. Final Report. The full report can be downloaded from <http://www.vbjk.be/en/node/3791>

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, J. & Moss P. 2011. *Working for inclusion: how early childhood education and care (ECEC) and its workforce can help Europe's youngest citizens*. Final report of the cross-European programme *Working for Inclusion: the role of early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*. Retrieved from: [www.childrenscotland.org.uk/wfi/](http://www.childrenscotland.org.uk/wfi/)

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, J., Gordon, J. & Edelman, 2013. *Early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children from disadvantaged backgrounds: findings from a European literature review and two case studies*. Study commissioned by the Directorate General for Education and Culture. Retrieved from: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/eccec/report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/eccec/report_en.pdf)



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## 1. The competence of ECEC staff in contexts of diversity

*'The range of issues tackled by ECEC staff and the diversity of the children in their charge requires continuous reflection on pedagogical practice as well as a systemic approach to professionalisation. In many countries, training for working with children at risk is an integral part of initial training, but many other aspects of diversity are not sufficiently covered. In addition, ECEC staff rarely have the same possibilities for induction, in-service training and continuous professional development as are available to school teachers.'* (EC communication on ECEC, 2011; p. 6)

In order to face the complex challenges of an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing society, practitioners working in contexts of diversity are expected not only to engage in meaningful and responsive interactions within which children get the possibility to learn the necessary competences, but also to intentionally involve parents and local communities in decision-making processes concerning the management, the quality and the curriculum of early childhood service (Rychen & Salganik ,2003; Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2012).

As research on accessibility shows<sup>5</sup>, ECEC services that invest in outreaching to marginalized groups and that are committed to take into account their needs in the organization of the centre, are found to be the most successful in fostering the participation of children from low-income and migrant backgrounds. In this sense, the staff needs to develop a pedagogical approach that welcomes diverse family cultures and facilitates a reciprocal dialogue with parents by building a relationship of trust. Such reciprocal and respectful exchange benefits both parties involved. It allows families to benefit from the support provided by the service. It also provides the staff with the parents' expert knowledge of their children and can support a deeper understanding of each child's development (Bennett & Moss, 2011). The pedagogical practices developed within the ECEC centre should reflect different understandings about care, education and upbringing of young children that are negotiated in contexts where contrasting values and beliefs emerge. When serving children and families living in difficult conditions, cooperation with local agencies responsible for education, health and social services becomes crucial. Early childhood practitioners should therefore work in close collaboration with other professionals (schools teachers, social workers,...).

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<sup>5</sup> TFIEY, Meeting Ghent, January 2013. See all info and documents on <http://www.kbs-frb.be/partner.aspx?id=293963&back=2067&langtype=1033> and the background papers of Vandenbroek, M. and Lazarri, A on accessibility of ECEC and the impact of ECEC on cognitive and non-cognitive development.



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## An example from a day care centre in Ghent:

'We have a mother from Somalia here who is a political refugee, and her child cries a lot. We asked the mother to show us how she comforts her baby and she answered: 'By singing for him'. The childcare worker recorded the song of the mother and now when the child is crying she plays the tape of the mother singing, and it helps a lot, the child calms down hearing the voice of the mother.' (Pedagogical counsellor, 2003 in: Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2012).

Research on the impact of ECEC on children's cognitive and non-cognitive development shows that it is important to also involve children in meaningful learning and socialising experiences that are responsive of their diverse needs, potentialities and capabilities. Children learn in different ways (Rogoff et al., 2005). As a consequence, we need open curricula that value children's everyday experiences and respect the specificity of their learning strategies<sup>6</sup>. As competent human beings, children actively shape their learning in everyday interactions with peers, adults and with the surrounding environment. The role of practitioners is to intentionally promote and facilitate such learning experiences within the ECEC centre by fostering and nourishing their curiosity, engagement and well-being (Jensen, 2011; Laevers, 2011). Practitioners should design and implement a balanced curriculum that nurtures children's holistic development by providing a variety of resources for play, exploration, meaning-making and self-expression (Mantovani, 2007; Pramling & Carlsson, 2008), rather than narrowing down pre-determined curricular goals in instructional activities that stifle children's natural interest for learning. Practitioners need to observe and document children's experiences by engaging with different stakeholders, including children (Picchio, Giovannini, Mayer & Musatti, 2012; Moss, 2011). Research shows that adults' responsive interactions to children's diverse needs – as individuals within a group – are fundamental for fostering a child's sense of identity and belonging (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008; Vandenbroeck, 2007). This, in turn, provides the basis for meaningful involvement in learning experiences. In this perspective, team work and partnership with families are considered to be essential components of ECEC quality especially in contexts of diversity (ISSA, 2010; DECET, ISSA 2011; Broadhead et al., 2008; Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2012). Such partnerships help practitioners to better understand the child's needs.

Early childhood practitioners working in contexts of diversity have demanding and complex tasks that require them to constantly reflect on their educational practices, to revise their pedagogical approaches and to co-construct professional knowledge together with children and parents. The individual professional cannot meet these demands alone. Systemic approaches to ECEC quality and workforce professionalization are needed (Bennett, 2012; Urban et al. 2012).

<sup>6</sup> See also Bennett, J; (2013), *Early Childhood curriculum for children from low-income and immigrant background*. Background document for the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early years, meeting 2.



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As highlighted by the *Working for Inclusion Programme*:

*'the workforce is central to ECEC services. It accounts for the greater part of the total costs of these services and is the major factor in determining children's experiences and their outcomes. How staff is recruited, trained and treated is critical [...] for the quality of early childhood services provided and for the appropriate inclusion of all children.'* (Bennett & Moss, 2011; p. 43)

The *CoRe study*<sup>7</sup> findings leave no doubt: quality in ECEC requires a competent practitioner but also a competent system that sustains and feeds into the on-going professionalization of staff in relation to changing societal needs. For the scope of this paper the characteristic of competent ECEC systems will be unfolded in three interconnected parts: a) staff initial preparation, b) continuing professional development and c) working conditions.

## 2. Initial professional preparation: a reciprocal relation between theory and practice

There is substantial evidence that staff qualifications matter: higher levels of initial preparation are associated with better ECEC quality as well as better developmental outcomes for children (Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). Staff with more formal education and more specialised early childhood training provides more stimulating, warm and supportive interactions with children (OECD, 2006). There is a consensus that the ideal level of qualification is on Bachelor level, but in many countries the actual qualification level of the ECEC workforce is lower (OECD, 2006, European Foundation for the Improvement of Working Conditions, 2008). Research also shows that staff qualifications in itself are not sufficient to predict quality of ECEC provision: the content of the training and the methodologies adopted for its delivery play a crucial role as well. In this sense the reciprocal integration of diversified training devices (lectures, small-group project work, practicum, analysis of practices) that produce recursive interplay between theorising and practicing activities is a major success factor (Urban, Vandenbroeck et al. 2011).

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<sup>7</sup> Final report can be downloaded at <http://www.vbjk.be/en/node/3791>



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## Some examples on the relation between theory and practice in pre-service training

### Italy

Studies on the effects of the 4-years bachelor degree in pre-primary education in Italy highlight the central role played by specific activities – such as practicum and group workshops - in developing cross-disciplinary and critically reflective competences of future practitioners (Nigris, 2004; Galliani & Felisatti, 2005). In particular, the strength of group workshops has been identified in linking theoretical university lectures) to practice work in ECEC settings by promoting an alternative approach to the construction of professional knowledge through the active involvement of students in collective project work activities. The most important characteristics of such workshops are: the involvement of practitioners with relevant experience in several areas of ECEC as facilitators and the small-group setting that promotes both frequent interactions among students and collective reflectivity.

### Denmark

Similar results are described in Danish literature on the professional preparation of *pedagogues*, with a focus on apprenticeship in ECEC services as a space to gain knowledge and to create new knowledge through ethnographic field work (Højbjerg, 2007). The importance of such practicum activities lies in the development of professional understanding and critically reflective competence by practicing and – at the same time researching – the daily life in ECEC services (Gulløv & Højlund, 2003).

### France

Knowledge acquisition and production, starting from students' concrete experiences, has also been studied in France (Barbier, 2006; Wittorski, 2005; Meunier, 2004). The method of *analyse des pratiques* stimulates the reflective capacities of social and educational professionals and it designs a theoretical framework for practitioners' reflection on their own practices. Professionalization is considered as an infinite and continuous process of transformation of competencies in relation to a process of transformation of activities. By analysing the practical experiences of students on the field – first on an individual basis and later in groups – this professionalization process is adequately steered and supported. The students exchange their understandings and experiences, they raise questions and they discuss possible solutions and conflicting alternatives. Through this process, they learn to deal with unforeseen pedagogic situations and to cooperate in searching for the most favourable solutions (Favre, 2004).

While European literature on training methodologies for the preparation of ECEC workforce is quite rich, there is far less research on the design of training curricula with a focus on diversity. The Eurochild Network under the support of the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013) provides some insights in 'A shared European approach to quality in early childhood services'. It stresses the importance of training initiatives focused on working with young children in contexts of diversity by adopting a child-centred approach that also involves families and local communities. Training curricula on anti-bias education, social justice, inclusion and multilingualism are vital in this respect (see



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for example: ISSA<sup>8</sup> and DECET<sup>9</sup>). This also includes preparing staff for the provision of *early language programmes*, which enable to support children in the development of the majority language while acknowledging their home language.

To conclude, international reports concur that adapted training routes and diversity profiling are necessary for early childhood staff working with children from different backgrounds. Increasing the recruitment of staff from diverse backgrounds and progressively upgrading their qualification level (to secondary and tertiary levels) significantly benefits children from poor and migrant families. In many cases however the elaboration of inclusive training routes, which facilitate the access of underrepresented groups to professional qualifications at tertiary level, remains a challenge. The *CoRe Study* findings show that successful strategies to face such challenges encompass the creation of various qualifying pathways, focused on the recognition of prior learning, for experienced untrained practitioners and the provision of additional support courses for students with an ethnic minority background (Thollon-Behar & Mony, 2011; Jensen, 2011; Miller & Cameron, 2011; Peeters & Brandt, 2011; Vandebroek et al., 2010).

## On diversifying the workforce:

It is often assumed that the diversity of the workforce is a precondition to work in contexts of diversity. Staff should reflect the diversity of the public addressed. As a result, many ECEC provisions work with bridging persons, bilingual teaching assistants and other types of assistants, recruited among ethnic minority populations or people with an experience of living in poverty. An international expert group (Vandebroek et al., 2010<sup>1</sup>) gave the following advice on this matter:

- Employ ethnic minority staff to diversify the team and challenge stereotypes and prejudice within the team
- Avoid ethnic matching but see to it that all staff members can work with all families
- Avoid reproducing the inequalities that prevail in the surrounding society (e.g. by hiring lower qualified ethnic minority staff with poorer working conditions than 'average' staff)
- Provide lower qualified staff with pathways of professionalisation that lead to similar qualifications and working conditions as 'average' staff
- Organise in-service staff development and joint team meetings for *all* staff

### 3. Continuing professional development and ongoing support

There is no simple linear causal relation between staff initial professional preparation and high quality of

<sup>8</sup> International Step by Step Association: [www.issa.nl](http://www.issa.nl)

<sup>9</sup> [Diversity and Social Inclusion](http://www.decet.org/fileadmin/decet-media/publications/Diversity-and-Social-Inclusion.pdf), exploring competences for professional practice in ECEC. <http://www.decet.org/fileadmin/decet-media/publications/Diversity-and-Social-Inclusion.pdf>



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ECEC provision. An interaction of multiple factors is at play here and initial professional preparation alone will not suffice to optimise the beneficial impact of ECEC for poor and migrant children. Ongoing professional development gains increased policy attention, especially in contexts of high socio-cultural and ethnic diversity. The provision of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and pedagogical guidance on the job are proven to be equally important in contributing to the quality of early childhood practices, yet only when it is of sufficient length and intensity (Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Urban et al., 2011; Žogla, 2008). Short term and ad-hoc in-service training courses (such as a few days a year) do not change traditional practices and convictions (Fukkink, & Lont, 2007); neither will they break the cycle that reproduces prejudices over time.

The Core study shows that successful initiatives for staff development are part of a coherent system of continuous efforts that focuses on transformative practices (reflecting on pedagogical practice in order to transform it so that the needs of the parents and children are better met). Effective CPD initiatives need to be sustained by a coherent pedagogical framework that provides support to practitioners' reflectivity in their everyday work. As illustrated in the Core study, the cases of Pistoia and Ghent illustrate the crucial role that local authorities can play in engaging pedagogical coordinators that support team work (Peeters & Brandt, 2011; Musatti, Picchio & Mayer, 2011). In cases where local authorities are less involved, a key role can be played by NGO's as illustrated by the Comenius Foundation in Poland (Żylicz, 2011). This Foundation coordinates a network of community pre-schools in rural areas and has elaborated a framework for professional development, tailored to the needs of local communities.

## **An example from the Flemish Community of Belgium:**

A study on professionalism in childcare, involving a wide array of stakeholders, advocated for a new professional at a Bachelor's level. This professional would be trained in pedagogical mentoring of low qualified childcare workers (Peeters, 2012a). In 2011 this new bachelor degree Pedagogy for the Young Child was introduced and the first students will graduate in 2014. They are expected to be 'multi- employable': as practitioners in childcare facilities, as pedagogical support persons for family day care providers, as coaches for practitioners (i.e. with a migrant background) in adult education and as pedagogical mentors in ECEC teams. The training focuses on methods for reflecting on practice and on constructing pedagogical practice in collaboration with practitioners, parents and children in contexts of diversity (Peeters, 2012; De Schepper, et al., 2012). New methods were developed to do so, focused on reflective thinking and becoming actors of change. These insights seem to have influenced recent (2012) Flemish legislation on childcare, as this stresses the importance of pedagogical mentoring to safeguard quality.



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## **An example from Central European projects:**

The International Step by Step Association developed training programs in Central and Eastern Europe to support professionals working in contexts of diversity. They also emphasize that participatory and co-constructive approaches lead to positive outcomes. The choice for deploying school-based courses and involving practicing master educators in their delivery was successful in stimulating a democratic vision of pedagogical work among practitioners. The professional development support provided by the network is structured around six pillars (Tankersley & Klaus, 2013):

1. Training modules on child-centred pedagogy and learning methodologies
2. A voluntary certification system that includes mentoring support
3. Local and on-line professional development communities, building upon participatory approaches for knowledge co-construction and nurturing critical thinking, dialogue and reflection
4. Practical guidelines for working with disadvantaged children, families and communities
5. Involving local practitioners in defining, with parents and communities, what constitutes quality in their context. This allows practitioners to increase their knowledge of family and community life so that the official curriculum can be enriched and made more attractive for children and their parents,
6. Promoting inclusion, diversity and democratic values through policy advocacy at the local level (participation of local practitioners to the civic life of their community) and at the national level (participation of experts members to policy-making consultation processes)

## **4. Governance: coherent policies for staff professionalization**

A specific governance in which certain conditions are met is a precondition for an effective ECEC workforce working with children from low-income and migrant families. Developing competent practices cannot be considered as the sole responsibility of individual practitioners but is a joint effort that involves teams, training centres, local administrative institutions and non-governmental bodies, as well as national and/or regional governance systems that provide the conditions for staff development (Urban, Vandenbroeck, et al., 2011). Research shows that successful initiatives are characterized by a coherent policy on institutional and inter-institutional levels, involving:

- Training of ECEC centres coordinators/managers/directors,
- Exchange of practices among centres (documenting, networking and disseminating),
- Peer groups meetings (learning communities)
- Pedagogical mentoring by specialised staff

The analysis of successful and sustainable professionalisation practices in Europe, as conducted in the Core study also leads to the following recommendations on the governance level:

- Increase the number of bachelor (ISCED 5) to at least 60% of the workforce
- Establish equal and reciprocal relationships between training/research institutes and ECEC institutions



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- Increase the job mobility: implement qualifying training pathways for assistants from migrant and poor backgrounds

The governance system should allocate space and time for mutual engagement with colleagues, parents and communities within ECEC institutions. Supportive measures are for example:

- Paid 'non-contact' time (meaning time on the job not spent with the children) for team meetings where staff can document their practice and reflect
- Site-based professional development and parent-dedicated activities.

Newly recruited ECEC staff should benefit from mentoring and supervision during the induction while all team members (including assistants) should have the opportunity to join regular in-service training and pedagogical support programmes. The opportunities in diversifying professional profiles, inter-professional collaboration and flexible career pathways should be fully deployed to favour the inclusion of staff from disadvantaged groups (Vonta, Balič, Rutar & Jager, 2011). But this should by no means lead to applying unfair or inequitable employment conditions for these groups, otherwise ECEC work may add to social disparities by relying – to a large extent – on undertrained and underpaid gendered workforce (Bennett & Moss, 2011)

Finally it is to be stressed that, where disadvantaged children and families are concerned, inter-professional collaboration between ECEC practitioners and health, social and psychological experts becomes essential. Systems of local governance therefore should strengthen the connection between such agencies while granting additional professional support to practitioners working in disadvantaged areas. Particular attention needs to be dedicated to fostering collaboration between ECEC services and primary schools in order to ensure smooth transitions, which lay the foundation for educational success especially for vulnerable children. Opportunities for inter-professional exchanges between ECEC practitioners and primary school teachers should be created through the implementation of joint initiatives and collegial activities.

## 5. Conclusions

In sum, early childhood practitioners play a crucial role in making services for the education and care of young children more effective and inclusive, especially where disadvantaged children and families are concerned. It is therefore extremely important that the workforce operating within such services is adequately supported by a competent systems relying on public policies, which are grounded on a cultural and political commitment to democratic rights, equality and solidarity. As stated concisely in the final report of the *Working for Inclusion Programme*:

*'ECEC services have the potential to support greater equality and inclusion, but they can also exacerbate inequality and exclusion. [...] If ECEC are to make their full contribution to reducing*



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*exclusion, not only must they be available and accessible, multi-purposes and responsive. They need a well educated workforce able and wanting to work democratically and with diversity – ‘democratic reflective practitioners’. And constant attention must be paid to how best to make these services welcoming, responsive and supportive of all families. Getting the structure right is essential, but so too is working on ethos and practice.’* (Bennett & Moss, 2011, p. 62-62)

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