



STRENGTHENING AND SUPPORTING  
THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE:

Competences  
and Standards

EARLY  
CHILDHOOD  
WORKFORCE  
INITIATIVE



**The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI)** is a global, multi-sectoral effort to mobilize countries and international partners to support and empower those who work with families and children under age 8. This initiative is jointly led by **Results for Development (R4D)** and the **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)**, and supported by a consortium of funders including Bernard van Leer Foundation, Open Society Foundations, ELMA Foundation, and Jacobs Foundation.

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## Introduction

There is substantial and growing evidence that early childhood development (ECD)<sup>1</sup> services positively impact children's development. Despite increasing knowledge and awareness of the benefits of ECD, we do not know enough about the early childhood workforce, who play a major role in delivering quality ECD services.

Key questions about the ECD workforce require greater reflection:

- What do early childhood professionals and paraprofessionals need to know and do in order to perform effectively?
- How do requisite knowledge and skills vary across contexts?
- What types of training and support do staff receive?
- How is the early childhood workforce recruited, compensated, and incentivized?

In an effort to address these questions, the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI), led by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and Results for Development (R4D), was created as a multi-stakeholder effort to support and empower those who work directly with young children. To inform and guide the Initiative, R4D is carrying out a series of *global landscape analyses* to establish the size and scope of the challenges faced by the early childhood workforce, while also highlighting promising practices countries have adopted in response to these challenges. Covering a range of roles including professionals and paraprofessionals, paid and unpaid workers, and frontline workers, trainers, supervisors, and managers from the education,<sup>2</sup> health and nutrition, social protection and child protection sectors, these analyses aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the current status of the workforce worldwide. The four themes<sup>3</sup> which will be explored in this series include: **competences and standards, training and professional development, continuous quality improvement, and working conditions**. This report, the second in this series, addresses the theme of *competences and standards*.

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## What are competences and standards?

In this report, *competences* encompass the requirements and expectations for what early childhood professionals and paraprofessionals should know and be able to do. In general, there are two types of competences: (i) competences for professionals and paraprofessionals, which outline what a worker in a specific role should know and be able to do; and (ii) competences for what training and professional development programs should impart. We define *standards* as guidelines and regulations which lay out requirements for entry and continuation in professional/paraprofessional roles. In general, two types of standards are relevant to the early childhood workforce: (i) personnel standards that outline the requirements a worker must meet in order to assume a role (e.g. educational requirements, experience); and (ii) professional standards which outline a code of ethics and commonly accepted procedures while in a particular role.<sup>4</sup> The primary focus of this report is on competences for professionals and paraprofessionals within the early childhood workforce.

This report also covers processes such as registration, licensing, certification, recertification, and accreditation, which are related to monitoring and ensuring adherence to competences and standards. For example, personnel standards may indicate that a worker must register with a workforce body or have a license or certification in order to be part of a system. Certification requirements may also be developed based on the competences identified as necessary for a specific role. While the exact definition of these processes depends on the specific system referenced, *certification* is generally considered the process by which a system ensures that someone who meets certain academic qualifications is also professionally competent. *Licensing* is very similar to certification but often involves a standardized examination and registration with a monitoring body. *Accreditation* refers to the process by which training institutions are recognized based on meeting quality standards.<sup>5</sup> Official *registration* usually refers to the formal listing with the government of an ECD provider employing the workforce; however, in some countries individual members of the early childhood workforce are also required to formally register with the local, regional, and/or national government.

## Why focus on competences and standards?

This theme was selected because competences and standards can: 1) increase the relevance of training and professional development, 2) enhance the quality of supervision, coaching, and mentoring opportunities, 3) support professionalization of the workforce, and 4) support workforce planning efforts.

While there is substantial evidence that training and professional development opportunities have an impact on the quality of services delivered by members of the workforce, we know that the content of these pre- and in-service opportunities matters greatly.<sup>6</sup> If training opportunities are closely aligned with what members of the early childhood workforce need to carry out their roles effectively, they have a better chance at improving program quality. To that end, competences for professionals and paraprofessionals, along with competences for training programs can help guide the design and delivery of training and professional development programs. In addition, competences for professionals and paraprofessionals can guide members of the workforce, along with their mentors, coaches, and supervisors, in identifying areas for improvement and ways of addressing them.

Competences and standards also have the potential to elevate the status of personnel who often receive low remuneration in comparison to their peers and sometimes lack incentives to remain in their roles. By defining competence for roles in the workforce, ensuring their alignment to training and professional development and supervision, coaching, and mentoring opportunities, and also elaborating personnel and professional standards, there is an implicit recognition of the unique knowledge and skills needed to carry out such roles, which can generate a professionalizing force in the system.

Competences for roles in the early childhood workforce can also support systems to adequately recruit and deploy personnel. When roles within the workforce are unclear and competences are undeveloped, it is difficult for a system to plan for recruitment and deployment, as competences for roles can clarify what different personnel bring to service delivery and can help answer questions about what roles within a system are needed. In serving these important functions, competences and standards ensure consistency and continuity in serving children and families across sectors and roles.

Although there is recognition that competences and standards are important, there have been few efforts to date to systematize the various approaches to developing and implementing them for the early childhood workforce. Therefore, this study aims to begin filling that gap in order to identify common approaches and challenges.

# Key Findings

An extensive review of published and grey literature yielded six findings related to the ways in which countries have used competences and standards to support early childhood systems:



## **1. Competences for professionals and paraprofessionals are likely to be in place in systems where there are clearly defined job descriptions. However, where these competences exist, they vary in format and content across roles, sectors, and regions.**

While there have been efforts across several high-income countries to develop competences for professionals and paraprofessionals, there have been fewer efforts in low- and middle-income countries. Since clearly defined job descriptions are the foundation on which competences are developed, competences for professionals and paraprofessionals are more likely to be in a system where such job descriptions exist. However, many countries lack clearly defined job descriptions; for example, of 14 countries where job descriptions were requested for a study on the social service workforce in West and Central Africa, only two countries were able to point to existing ones.<sup>7</sup> And even where job descriptions are elaborated and competences are in place, there remain variations in terms of what types of competences, whether for professionals and paraprofessionals or for training programs, exist and their content and format.



## **2. There is no common core of competences for the early childhood workforce although competences commonly emphasize the importance of domains such as monitoring and evaluation, and interpersonal and communication skills.**

Although there are a number of common domains that are emphasized, competences for professionals and paraprofessionals vary across roles, sectors, and contexts. A review of competences for early childhood educators across 11 states in the U.S. found that although competences fall under eight broad domains, there is significant variation between states in terms of which domains are included and how these domains are referenced.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a review of four national competence statements for the workforce supporting children from birth to age 8 in the U.S. found broad consensus in expectations for professionals in a number of areas; however, there were differences in terms of the types of assessment – observational, formative, summative – that were emphasized as important for practitioners to use in their day-to-day work, as well as how practitioners should work with families. While all of the statements emphasized the importance of working with families, there were differences in how working with families was framed. Three statements emphasized the need for practitioners to help families access other services to support children’s development and well-being while one emphasized engagement with families to specifically support children’s learning and development.<sup>9</sup>



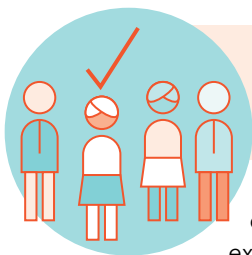
## **3. Competences and standards can enhance the relevance of training and professional development programs to the needs of personnel.**

When competences are developed for professional and paraprofessional roles, they can provide an important link to training and professional development programs and their curricula. Competences for roles can be used in developing and delivering competence-based training. Several countries have also sought to align competences for roles with competences for training programs to provide guidance and benchmarks on quality. In the U.S., the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) Standards for Professional Preparation are used by professional development programs to support their planning processes. Standards can also provide benchmarks which can support programs in their effort to deliver high quality training. These standards may lay out requirements for the length of programs, qualifications of educators, and facilities, which may then be monitored through accreditation processes.



#### **4. Competences can support continuous quality improvement by enabling professionals, paraprofessionals, and their supervisors, to more effectively assess performance.**

By clarifying what members of the early childhood workforce need to know and be able to do in order to perform well in their roles, competences can support professionals and paraprofessionals in their efforts to continuously improve their practice. If competences are defined at a program or systems level or are used to develop self-assessment tools, members of the workforce can refer to them to evaluate their own performance and identify strengths and areas for improvement. In addition, while support from supervisors may vary in terms of its formality, tools based on established competences can help supervisors assess job performance, provide follow-up support, and track progress over time.



#### **5. Competences and standards can guide recruitment processes if aligned with the skills and profiles of the existing and potential future workforce.**

Competences for roles can support recruitment processes and other systems planning efforts. Ministries of Health, for example, often do not have a common understanding of the expected tasks and competences required of community health workers (CHWs), which can make it difficult to identify the mix of skills and therefore, the number of individuals in particular roles needed to effectively deliver necessary services.<sup>10</sup> In such cases, clearer job descriptions and a careful review of competences and standards could better support broader workforce planning activities. It is also important that competences and standards are aligned with the existing workforce and potential future workforce. Without such alignment, competences may be difficult to implement and could inadvertently force members of the current workforce out of their positions, and undermine other objectives in recruitment, such as ensuring diversity.



#### **6. Few systems, particularly in low and middle-income countries, have registration, certification, and licensing procedures in place, even though these processes can help recognize and professionalize the workforce and support the delivery of quality services.**

Few systems have official registration, licensing and certification requirements in place for the early childhood workforce; where these requirements do exist, they vary across contexts. For example, Kosovo requires that all social workers undergo a licensing process, but does not explicitly require a social worker to hold a degree in social work, while Croatia's *Act on the Social Work Activity* (2011) stipulates that in order to be a licensed social worker, one must possess a B.A. or M.A. degree in social work.<sup>11</sup> Where systems have licensing and certification requirements, these processes can support the professionalization of the workforce by creating consistent requirements which reduce the disparity in qualifications among individuals in a particular role. Different levels of licensure or certification may also help to facilitate career advancement.

# Conclusion and areas for further research

Competences and standards provide a critical foundation for preparation and ongoing support for members of the early childhood workforce. In addition, they can help policy planning efforts and unleash a professionalizing force by acknowledging the complexity of what members of the early childhood workforce do. Yet competences and standards are not widespread, especially in low and middle-income countries. As countries consider how best to develop and integrate competences and standards in their systems, they may want to consider identifying whether the foundations are in place for developing them, whether competences and standards for other roles within the early childhood workforce at the country, regional, or global levels can be used to guide their development, and how existing systems to monitor the quality of services provided by members of the early childhood workforce and training programs can be improved through their application.

While this study advances existing knowledge on the early childhood workforce by synthesizing relevant policies and approaches to competences and standards from across sectors, regions, and roles, many major knowledge gaps remain. In particular, there is limited research available on the impact of developing and implementing competences and standards in systems, as well as on how to ensure alignment between competences for different roles. Further research is needed to address these topics in order to contribute to dialogue and policy efforts to strengthen support for the early childhood workforce.

## Endnotes

1. The term early childhood development (ECD) is used in this report to refer to services across the education, health and nutrition, and social and child protection sectors. The term early childhood education and care (ECEC) is used to refer to services encompassing early education and care from birth to the transition to primary school.
2. When referring to the education sector, we are also including the child care field unless otherwise noted.
3. These themes were identified in collaboration with a group of experts convened by the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative in September 2015.
4. We acknowledge that the terms competences and standards are often used interchangeably. We have chosen to define and use these terms in this way for the sake of clarity in this report.
5. Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) and UNESCO. (2016). *Southeast Asian Guidelines for Early Childhood Teacher Development and Management*. Bangkok: SEAMEO Secretariat and UNESCO Bangkok Office.
6. The first report in this series covers the topic of training and professional development. Please see: Mitter, R. & Putcha, V. (2018). *Strengthening and Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce: Training and Professional Development*. Washington, D.C.: Results for Development.
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