

THE COMPETENT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM IN THE CITY OF GHENT: A LONG-TERM INVESTMENT IN CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Childcare in the city of Ghent has a long history and has been extensively documented by reports, articles and videos since the end of the 1970s (Peeters, 1993; Peeters, 2008, UNESCO, 2010, De Meyer, 2012). In 1979, before any Continuing Professional Development (CPD) initiatives were taken, a baseline quality measurement was carried out. Later studies on the impact of the CPD initiatives on the quality of the services were set up in 1982 and 1984 (Peeters, 1993) and documented through videos (Peeters, 2008). In 2011 a case study was conducted as part of the CoRe research (Peeters & Brandt, 2011; Brandt, 2012). That case study examined the competences of childcare practitioners working with under threes in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and how these practitioners were perceived by their peers and by pedagogical counsellors as excellent workers. This research focussed especially on the acquisition of competences required to work with ethnic minorities, disadvantaged and low-income families. A focus group with four coordinators of childcare centres was set up to study professional development policies at the institutional level. Further on, biographical interviews with nine childcare workers from three different Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services were organised. After one month, the researcher conducted an in depth interview with the same nine practitioners. Four core themes deriving from the biographical interviews were discussed:

1. the (changing) views about working with parents;
2. the impact of working with children and families in disadvantaged neighbourhoods;

3. learning in the initial training and in practice; and
4. the openness towards other visions and values.

In total, over 16 hours of interviews and focus groups were transcribed. The last phase of the study consisted of contextualising the data with the coordinators of the childcare services, and with the coordinator of the Pedagogical Guidance Centre, who was responsible for CPD of childcare practitioners in the city of Ghent.

The results of those different studies on the CPD system are used in this chapter, together with documents of the Pedagogical Guidance Centre of Ghent, which is responsible for the CPD initiatives.

But first, we give a short historical overview of the history of ECEC in the Flemish Community of Belgium in general and in the city of Ghent in particular.

The Flemish Community of Belgium at a glance

Belgium is a federal state. Policy area such as family services, childcare services, education, youth work and welfare are regulated at the community level. Basically, the same kind of services is offered to families in all three (Dutch, French and German speaking) communities, but different emphases or nuances exist. The three communities of Belgium all have a distinct system for ECEC. Under this split system (UNESCO, 2010), the childcare facilities for children from birth to three years old are the responsibility of the Department of Welfare, with governmental organisations being responsible for the quality of the policy: *Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance*, *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* (French-speaking part), *Kind en Gezin*, Flemish Community of Belgium (Dutch-speaking part), *Kind und Familie*, German Community of Belgium (German-speaking part). Pre-primary education (*kleuterscholen*, *écoles maternelles*) from two and a half years old to mandatory school age (six years) is the responsibility of the Department of Education and is integrated in the system of elementary education (two and a half until 12 years).

High enrolment

Belgium is one of the six Member States that achieved both objectives of the Barcelona Targets, with 99% of enrolment in pre-primary education and nearly 40% in childcare (European Parliament, 2013). Even in times of economic crisis, policy makers, researchers and stakeholders in Belgium have invested in increasing accessibility for vulnerable groups and in making childcare and pre-primary education affordable for all parents. In Flanders, the implementation of the new law on childcare (*Decreet Kinderopvang voor baby's en peuters*) in April 2014 aims at universal provision by 2020 and a unique quality monitoring system for all types of home-based and centre-based childcare services.

The provision of structural services for the entire population, as well as providing additional funding towards disadvantaged groups, appears to be the most effective strategy for making ECEC accessible, especially for children from

immigrant background or low-income families (Leseman, 2009; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014). For the childcare sector, the Flemish government decided early 2009, to take structural and legislative measures. Ever since, all funded childcare centres are obliged to reserve 20% of their capacity for single-parent families and families living in poverty and in crisis situations. In the subsidised sector (80% of the childcare places) of the Flemish Community, the parents contribute between 5 euro¹ and 27,36 euro a day, according to their income. The private childcare centres, which receive no grants, can freely set their price. The costs of childcare (from birth to three years old and out of school care) are tax deductible: all childcare costs are 100% deductible with a maximum of 11,20 euro a day.

The pre-primary school from two and a half until six is cost-free, except for meals and extracurricular activities.

In pre-primary education, a bachelor qualification is required. The pre-primary teachers receive almost the same salary as teachers in primary and secondary schools. Consequently, one could say that the level of qualification necessary to be a pre-primary teacher is high and the working conditions are good, compared to other European Member States. However, in the childcare sector, the level of qualification required is problematic. In several international reports (OECD, 2001, 2006; UNICEF, 2008), it was mentioned that the qualification level of staff in Belgian childcare is unacceptably low (16 years plus three). The situation in Flanders is even worse, as there are no qualification requirements in family day care and in the former independent childcare sector. In the former subsidised childcare centres (only 17% of the childcare places), pre-service training on post-secondary vocational level (one year) is mandatory. In 2008 a research on professionalism in Flemish childcare concluded that the initial training was not able to prove an added value (Peeters, 2008) and in 2010 the governmental organisation took the initiative to unite representatives of the sector and the schools. The results of this survey came to one conclusion: the training is not able to meet the needs of the field (Kind en Gezin, 2010). The new decree on childcare (2014) finally stipulates that all childcare workers should have a qualification, but this will only be implemented in 2024.

The next section gives a historical overview of childcare in the city of Ghent, where a coherent policy was developed to increase the level of professionalism in childcare centres, despite the low level of initial training.

Ghent takes the lead in a coherent CPD policy

In the municipality of Ghent, the low level of initial training has been supplemented successfully with CPD. More than 35 years of intensive pedagogical counselling of childcare staff resulted in innovative practices regarding outreach to families in poverty, ethnic minority families and families of children with special needs. We go back in recent history to describe the context of this successful investment in professionalisation. In the early 1970s, the city council took the initiative of starting a Pedagogical Guidance Centre (PGC) for municipal schools. The pedagogical

quality of the education system in the 1960s and early 1970s was very poor and the Alderman wanted to improve the results of working-class children in these schools. The city council unfolded ambitious plans with the 'Pedagogical Guidance Centre' and engaged three scientific collaborators from the Ghent University holding a PhD: a pedagogue and two developmental psychologists. Since childcare was integrated in the education system, the PGC was also in charge of the childcare centres. In 1979, the PGC decided to participate in an OMEP (*Organisation Mondiale de l'Éducation Préscolaire*) study on the quality of day-care centres and out-of-school centres. The results of the OMEP research showed an extreme emphasis on medical-hygienic aspects in childcare centres, the absence of any form of participation by parents and a very child-unfriendly approach (Peeters, 1993). In autumn 1979 the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University set up an action-research project in collaboration with the PGC. The action research project was theoretically inspired by social constructivism and by the notion of the 'teacher-as-researcher' (Stenhouse, 1975) and the Freirian notion of 'cultural action'. These frameworks were put into practice in adult education through democratic, participative and experiential training methods. Some of the guiding principles included:

1. avoiding the hierarchical dichotomy between researchers (who took the role of pedagogical counsellors) and practitioners;
2. involving practitioners in debates, reflecting on their everyday work; and
3. documenting their experiences as actors of change (Peeters, 2008).

In 1984, Ghent University evaluated the effects of the pedagogical counselling in the action-research projects and the researchers concluded that the collaboration between pedagogical counsellors and practitioners had had a very positive effect on increasing the level of competences in practitioners with low qualifications (secondary vocational level) (Peeters, 1993), and as a result, the PGC developed a comprehensive policy for continuous professional development (De Meyer, 2012).

The competent system in Ghent: involving every level

Over the past 35 years, the PGC gradually developed a multi-layered competent system that involves all the people working in ECEC: individual practitioners, teams, heads of centres, district-coordinators, the director of the childcare unit and the local policy makers.

A brief overview will guide the reader through the different levels of the Ghent competent system.

On the level of the individual practitioner/ heads of centres

- a choice between courses and peer learning groups;
- an introduction course for new practitioners and heads of centres.

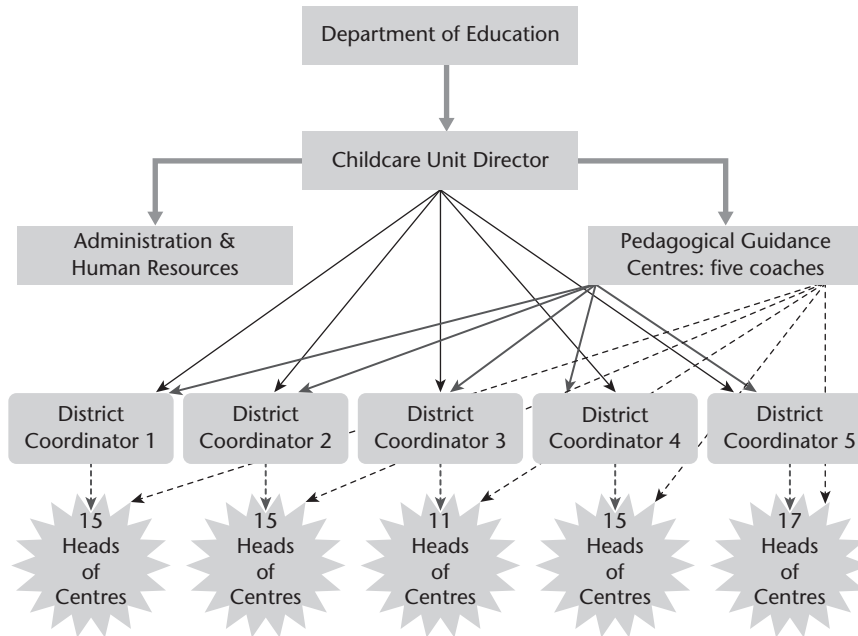


FIGURE 4.1 Organisation chart of the Childcare Unit of the Department of Education, City of Ghent

All workers of the services are provided with a wide range of courses concerning children, parents, teams and the community. They can choose between two different models: courses for individual workers and peer groups for workers representing their institution. The childcare sector is expanding in Ghent: even in times of economic crisis new centres open and new workers are hired. In order to get informed and grow familiar with the mission, vision and organisation of ECEC in Ghent, new practitioners and new heads of centres are obliged to attend a four-day training course.

On the team/institution level:

- pedagogical study for the whole team of the centre;
- coaching to reflect upon practice;
- coaching of changing processes;
- courses for new teams;
- introducing new pedagogical approaches.

The PGC strongly promotes the combination of a 'Pedagogical Study day' for the whole workforce of the centre with coaching in teams afterwards. This approach is an effective form of CPD in order to change the pedagogical practice and has had a clear impact on collegiality and teamwork: the practitioners are actively involved, which has proved to be effective in improving the educational practice.

On demand, a pedagogical counsellor can support a team during the process of change. Prior to the coaching, the counsellor profoundly explores the questions of the staff and formulates the goals of the coaching process. Afterwards, the counsellor makes a proposal describing the content, methods and duration of the coaching process. The actual coaching is carried out by the pedagogical counsellor or by the head of the centre.

The PGC also organises week courses for teams of new childcare centres. During this week, members of the new team develop a common pedagogical vision. This is achieved through reflections on study visits, discussions about vision and about how to put the vision into practice. Through developing this common pedagogical approach within the specific context, the team of the new childcare centre is prepared to welcome children and parents in appropriate ways. The programme of this week-long course is developed by the pedagogical counsellor of the team in cooperation with the head of the centre.

On the city level (Childcare Unit of the Department of Education/PGC):

- learning communities for the pedagogical counsellors, the middle management and the practitioners: organising peer groups and intervention groups;
- organisation of a Pedagogical Conference every two years for the whole workforce of all municipal centres;
- implementing new pedagogical approaches;
- development of tools;
- meetings between pedagogical counsellors and staff of the Childcare Unit, the Department of Education and policy makers.

In the new millennium, the investment of the city in a support structure for the services was continued through the creation of the 'Dienst Kinderopvang' – the Childcare Unit, a sub-department within the Department of Education. The first director of the Childcare Unit was established in 2002 and in 2006 the director received the support of a middle management of five persons at bachelor level, each of them working as a coordinator in a specific district of the town. Each pedagogical counsellor is also connected to a district of the town and works in close cooperation with that district coordinator. The duos prepare monthly meetings for the heads of centres, taking into account a good balance between pedagogical and organisational themes. Together they involve the participants by using new coaching methods and by introducing new tools that can be useful to heads of centres or staff members in the team meetings of their institution. The roles of the duos in the meeting are specifically assigned: the pedagogical counsellor is the group facilitator and the district coordinator is the leader of the group.

A Pedagogical Conference is organised every two years for the whole workforce of the childcare sector of the city of Ghent. In this Pedagogical Conference, practitioners from different services present innovative projects to colleagues of other day-care centres. These workshops are the result of a process of change that was developed during the team meetings in the different childcare centres.

Over the last few years, the district meetings shifted to what is called in literature, a learning community (Brajkovic, 2014) in which heads of centres learn from each other and develop a common vision on pedagogical, social and organisational matters.

The PGC also plays an important role in implementing new pedagogical approaches towards all day-care centres. Services which want to experiment with innovative approaches, receive coaching by a pedagogical counsellor over a period of four years, as was the case in the North Italian documentation approach (Malavasi & Zoccatelli, 2013) and the Wanda method (Sharmahd, et al., 2015), a coaching method that is based on an appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001) and on critically analysing the pedagogical practice (Barbier, 2006). In support for the introduction of this new approach, the coach meets the practitioners every week, facilitates team meetings, and organises pedagogical conferences, study visits and supervision for directors of centres. Once the innovative approach is fully tested, it will be disseminated to other centres and then the coaching of the team becomes less intensive.

Peer groups with a focus on exchanging interesting practices among different childcare centres, are highly appreciated by practitioners and are powerful tools in changing pedagogical practices. Over the years, the peer groups evolved into supervision groups. Pedagogical counsellors support different supervision groups: e.g. for heads of centres sharing a common pedagogical approach, for mentors of trainees or for practitioners focussing on the active participation of young children. The counsellors support the teams by creating a safe atmosphere where reflection on practice leads to new knowledge and innovative practices.

Therefore, a resource centre was set up within the PGC. The coaches developed a large number of instruments: boxes with didactical materials and games to use in coaching sessions, ICT applications and booklets for the children in the out-of-school centres. Over the years practitioners and heads of centres were getting more involved in the development of these tools. The Childcare Unit also published booklets and videos for parents about different topics and more specifically, for parents from poor and minority backgrounds.

Monthly meetings are organised with the whole staff of the Department of Education and the policy makers of the city and with the pedagogical counsellors. Policy priorities and pedagogical targets are discussed, evaluated and adjusted. CPD initiatives for all the childcare centres are developed based on common themes and the role of each part of the organisation in the process of change is fixed.

On the level of the Flemish Community

Participation of the Childcare Service in advisory groups of governmental organisations

The counsellors and district coordinators are members of many advisory groups: on the social function of childcare; on inclusive childcare; on competences profiles of the childcare worker; on new legislation on childcare; and on the new quality framework for children from birth to three years old; and many others.

International networks and European innovation projects

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the PGC has been active in many international networks. In workshops and conferences outside Flanders, counsellors have shared the good practice of Ghent. Ghent receives visitors from all over the world and in 2013 it hosted the first Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years (Peeters & Vandekerckhove, 2015). The city was involved in four different transnational European Social Fund projects, in the DECET network on diversity in ECEC (www.decet.org) and also in the Reyn Network for Roma children from the ISSA Network (www.issa.nl/content/reyn). This active participation in international networks is of major importance. It has inspired the pedagogical coaches in their work with the teams and with practitioners and directors, and has led to many innovations in childcare centres in Ghent. The recognition of the municipal approach in international reports (OECD, 2001, 2006; UNESCO, 2010; Urban et al., 2011) valorises the efforts of practitioners, head of centres and policy makers in Ghent and also stimulates the local policy makers to continue to invest in the development of a competent system in the ECEC field.

Critical factors that make pedagogical coaching and professional learning work

From the evaluations of 35 years of experience with coaching and CPD in general, some critical factors that make professional learning effective can be identified.

First, during the CPD and especially the coaching sessions, the practitioners should be able to express themselves freely in an open dialogue, and the culture of the team must be valorised. Therefore the counsellors need to have an appreciative approach and the coaches need to have a strong confidence in the capabilities and the engagement of the practitioners.

Second, the policy of the PGC states that effective CPD should fit the mission and vision of the local organisation, underpinned by a framework of principles and values. This quality framework must be sufficiently broad and open, so that practitioners and teams are challenged to discover, to discuss and to engage themselves in developing a common vision and practice, a common culture based on common values.

The current quality framework of the Childcare Unit in Ghent is the result of a process of two years of reflecting and discussing with a delegation of heads of centres and practitioners. The vision, principles and values are discussed and put into practice in every team. The creation of a common vision, based on common values, that is embraced by all actors, is an ongoing process that involves every actor.

A third critical factor for effective CPD is the ownership of the change. In Latin countries, it is a tradition that pedagogical counselling takes place in a non-hierarchical position. In Northern Italy (Reggio, Pistoia, Florence) – where the famous ‘pedagogistas’ are in charge of the pedagogical counselling – there are no head of centres in the centres (Musatti & Mayer, 2003; Terzi, 2006). Also in France, the pedagogical coaches, involved in the analyses of practice (*analyse des pratiques*) do not have a hierarchical position towards the practitioners they are coaching (Fablet, 2004; Favre, 2004; see elsewhere in this book). Although these practices are based upon a long tradition in pedagogical coaching in ECEC, it does not mean that heads of centres cannot carry out coaching. In the world of Human Resource Management, coaching and leadership are often linked, and it is not uncommon that managers take up a coaching role within their hierarchical position (Blanchard, 2007; Van Den Broeck & Venter, 2011).

The policy of the city of Ghent towards the role of the head of centres changed since they began pedagogical counselling in 1979. In the beginning the coach was always someone external, who could not have a hierarchical position towards the practitioners. Some of the heads of centres and staff members collaborated intensively with the counsellors to increase the pedagogical quality of their childcare centre. Others experienced them rather as a threat to their hierarchical position as head of centres. In those centres the innovation stopped when the support of the pedagogical counsellor on the project ended. Therefore the PGC valorised the role of the director in the process of change. He or she had to take up the leadership of the process of change. As a consequence, the differences between the role of the head of centre and pedagogical counsellor have to be clearly defined. Heads of centres are leaders of ECEC centres: they co-ordinate the practical daily activities of the centre and they execute organisational and administrative tasks. Heads of centres organise team meetings and evaluate the practitioners. In cooperation with the practitioners they implement the pedagogical vision and the quality framework in practice.

Democratic leadership helps the heads of centres reduce the tension that can rise between the role of counsellor and evaluator, it creates a safe atmosphere of open communication. External counsellors may coach heads of centres and/or support the team, but only on demand and in close cooperation with the heads of centres or the internal coach. Pedagogical counsellors play a specific role in supporting and coaching heads of centres and teams in developing their pedagogical vision and constructing new pedagogical practice. As a coach or facilitator they create a culture of mutual learning. Pedagogical counsellors combine a broad knowledge on ECEC and group processes and dynamics, with the competence to use different models of coaching (Wanda, documentation...) that stimulate reflective thinking.

The pedagogical counsellors work together with other coaches in the PGC. They attend intervision, go to conferences, are active in international networks and attend training. As a result, they develop a broad view on ECEC, which enables them to construct new pedagogical knowledge. External coaches are not only working on the team level but also on the level of the Childcare Unit.

How do practitioners learn in a competent system?

In the last part of this chapter we describe the results of a case study. In this part of the CoRe study, the views of nine practitioners were analysed. This study aimed at ‘how, what and where’ of learning opportunities during the full career of practitioners. The study revealed important information about the opportunities and experiences of practitioners with the competent system of the city of Ghent (Peeters & Brandt, 2011; Brandt, 2012). Furthermore, this study illustrates the specific competences they developed through the very different CPD initiatives. Recently, the results of this case study were combined with the results of a survey among 50 practitioners working in contexts of diversity and poverty in ten countries (DECET & ISSA, 2011). The researchers concluded that four competences are fundamental when working with children and families:

1. openness towards parents,
2. engagement to work towards social change,
3. the ability to reflect critically, and
4. the ability to create new practices and knowledge (Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014).

We used these four competences to categorise the results of the present case study.

(1) Openness towards parents: the dialogue with parents as a source of professionalisation

Practitioners become sensitive and receptive to what really matters for parents in the education of their child. From a viewpoint of open communication and negotiation with parents, they construct a common approach.

Practitioners put it this way:

Parents are the first educators of their children; therefore they must hear their voice on what is done in the childcare centre. We cannot meet all the wishes of the parents but we examine together how far we can go.

Once you realise that by listening to the parents the relationship with the child gets better, then it is obvious that you learn from communicating with parents. The limits of how far one can go in following the parents’ opinions are discussed in the team itself. If something is difficult for us, we discuss it with the pedagogical counsellor

If parents see that their child is happy when leaving in the evening, then the parents are satisfied and then I am also going home with a happy feeling.

(2) *An engagement towards social change: the development of a common culture of openness, based on the conviction that every professional can make the difference*

For the practitioners, the creation of a common culture in the Childcare Service and the childcare institutions is a crucial factor for effective professional learning. This culture is underpinned by a clear pedagogical vision and by a set of values on working with parents, children and the neighbourhood.

This common culture functions as an inspirational framework for the recruitment of new workforce, for training, supervision groups, pedagogical conferences and team meetings. Pedagogical counsellors and directors support teams to reflect and evaluate this vision, to translate it into the practice of their particular context.

The most important value of this common culture is the conviction that every professional can make a difference for a child, for parents and for colleagues. The practitioners state that when they become actors of change in the life of children and adults, this pertains to a greater motivation in professional development.

A practitioner talks about the openness to parents, it means to her to 'really *have lived in a group*'. When she was asked what she meant, she answered:

To be myself, and at the same time to make the difference for the others, to accept in a relation the other as being different.

Working in ECEC centres involves teamwork. In teams with a common culture of openness and open dialogue, practitioners are stimulated to experiment, colleagues can reflect on and discuss openly on each other's pedagogical interventions. This occurs in a safe atmosphere, which is a source for learning for the new colleagues.

A new member of a team puts it this way:

That feeling of being accepted increases your self-confidence and this helped me to communicate better with the parents and this again reinforced my self-confidence.

Democratic leadership of directors, appreciative and participative approaches of counsellors, appreciative approaches can help to create a safe atmosphere to speak openly and freely, to discuss, to disagree.

(3) *The ability to reflect critically*

The interviewees stated that crucial aspects of the job – like working with parents, communicating and negotiating and working in a context of diversity – is not

learned at school but is the result of pedagogical guidance. They prefer active forms of learning: not by theory but by reflection on practice.

You learn by stealing from the experiences of colleagues.

Practitioners declare they like to learn in an informal way through practice, by sharing knowledge and reflecting together with colleagues. Directors have an important role to support this process of reflecting in team:

Because childcare practitioners work permanently in team, they must be able to rely on each other, to support each other and this attitude of team work determines the learning style that the practitioners prefer.

An experienced practitioner concludes:

I was lucky, at the time when I started to work in the childcare of the city of Ghent, my director send me to a colleague group on diversity and in this group I visited different childcare centres in Brussels and in other places. So I have seen a lot of good practices and through the discussions we had during study visits, I learned a lot by the work-experience itself.

(4) *The ability to create new practices and knowledge*

The different CPD initiatives challenge practitioners to increase their professionalism and to develop new relations with parents, children, colleagues and the neighbourhood and this enables them to create new pedagogical practices and knowledge.

Problems are always talked through with parents; we are looking together for solutions, because in most cases there are no clear cut solutions.

Conclusions

The CoRe case study on the municipal childcare in Ghent (Peeters & Brandt, 2011) concluded that practitioners learn best when they operate in a competent system. This is characterised by a coherent multi-layered and diversified policy towards CPD, during a sustained period of time, supported by specialised pedagogical counsellors. An important critical success factor is the ownership of the change, which must be shared within the childcare centres.

The competent system of the city of Ghent is furthermore characterised by a common culture on different levels of the system. This culture is underpinned by a common vision, by ethical values towards children, parents, colleagues and the neighbourhood. It strives for social change on all levels of the competent system. The competent system must give opportunities on different levels for

open communication and negotiation with all actors, in order to create new practice and knowledge. On the level of the teams two critical factors for success are essential: a vision on learning, starting from practice with a focus on sharing experiences with colleagues in and between the centres, and a constant team reflection on the daily practice.

Taking into account the conclusions of the Eurofound systematic review on CPD (2015, see the Introduction to this book), we can conclude that the city of Ghent is on the right track. Long-term pedagogical support by specialised counsellors, which starts from a focus on reflection on practice, can be an effective way to critically explore the link between theory and practice in the staff's everyday work and is an effective way to improve the pedagogical practice. From the Eurofound study, we also learn that a CPD approach like the one developed in Ghent, built upon a common vision that is based on scientific evidence and also adapted to the local needs, is quite effective. From the CoRe study (Urban et al., 2011) we learned that a competent system requires policies that effectively address the entire ECEC system and that an investment in leadership capacity at all layers of the system, is of key importance. Based on the recommendations and results of both European studies, we conclude that the Ghent approach, which is characterised by a coherent and multi-layered system of CPD, is in line with both studies and could be described as effective.

Note

- 1 Can be reduced to 1,56 euro for parents in financial or medical need

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