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Early childhood education and care (ECEC) assistants in Europe: Pathways towards continuous professional development (CPD) and qualification¹

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Abstract

There is broad consensus amongst researchers and international organisations that the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC), which means the wellbeing of children and families, depends on well-educated and competent staff. This remains a challenge in Europe, since part of the workforce is also represented by low-qualified ECEC assistants in many EU countries. In the CoRe study (2011), assistants are defined as 'invisible workers', meaning that their presence is usually not taken into account in policy documents and that they have far fewer possibilities of qualification and professional development than core practitioners. Building on the findings of the CoRe study, a recent NESET II report reviewed the profiles of ECEC assistants in 15 European countries and their professionalisation opportunities. This article describes the report's findings, with a focus on the roles of assistants and on how to create coherent pathways towards their qualification and continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities. The latter is shown through the examples of three case studies carried out in Denmark, France and Slovenia. Recommendations for policy makers are included in the conclusions. The framework of the article is the 'competent system': as pointed out in the CoRe study, individual competences alone are not sufficient to create quality. A 'competent system' is needed which includes collaboration between individuals, teams and institutions and has competent governance at policy level. This means working within a holistic 'educare' approach that is able to value the educative role of caring and the caring role of education.

1 | INTRODUCTION: FRAMEWORK, AIMS AND METHOD

Researchers, experts and policy makers have reached a consensus about the fact that the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and ultimately the outcomes for children and families depend on competent staff (Peeters, De Kimpe, & Brandt, 2016). At the European level, the importance of a qualified workforce is acknowledged in the

revised priorities for strategic cooperation in the field of education and training (European Commission, 2015). Several studies and reports have underlined that quality in ECEC depended on competent staff who are capable of working on an equal footing within a holistic framework in which the concepts of 'care' and 'education' are interdependent (UNESCO, 2010; European Commission, 2011; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). In this regard, the European Quality Framework for ECEC states that 'recognizing the ECEC workforce as professionals is key. Professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes. Developing common education and training programmes for all staff working in an ECEC context (e.g., preschool teachers, assistants, educators, family day carers etc.), helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality' (European Commission Thematic Group on ECEC Quality, 2014, p. 9).

Although it is agreed that quality is linked to a competent workforce, the CoRe study (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, & Van Laere, 2011; Vandenbroeck, Urban, & Peeters, 2016) points out that individual competences alone are not enough to ensure quality. A 'competent system' is needed which includes collaboration between individuals, teams and institutions and which has competent governance at policy level. Moreover, a competent system is described as one that builds upon staff's initial good education and continuous professional development (CPD), which includes providing staff with regular opportunities to co-reflect on ideas and practices. Creating competent systems continues to be a challenge in Europe: the requirements and competences for ECEC workers differ between countries, the qualifications of ECEC staff in Europe remain low and there is too little investment in strong systems of continuous professional development. These aspects are emphasised by the fact that, in many countries, part of the workforce is represented by low-qualified ECEC assistants who support practitioners/teachers' work with children and families at specific moments of the day. In the CoRe study, assistants are defined as 'invisible workers', meaning that their presence is usually not taken into account in policy documents and that they have far fewer possibilities of qualification and professional development than core practitioners. This is in contrast with the fact that in many countries the share of assistants is rapidly growing, representing up to 50% of the staff (see Table 1). On the findings of CoRe (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016), a recent study (Peeters, Sharmahd, & Budginaité, 2016) carried out for the European Commission by the Network of Experts on the Social Dimension of Education and Training (NESET II)² analysed the professional situation of assistants in 15 European countries³, developing specific recommendations at policy level for the Member States. The countries were selected according to geographical balance. The study focused on the following research questions:

- What are the qualifications (or no qualifications) required in European countries for the job of assistants in ECEC?
- Are there interesting paths of continuous professional development for assistants in European countries? Are these paths shared with the core practitioners? Are there systems in which assistants are valued by a competent system which considers their role as being inherently part of the educational community?
- How can policy and practice make use of these paths?
- Is it correct to assume that a high percentage of assistants consists of people from an ethnic-minority background or from lower socioeconomic groups? How does this effect practice? Can the presence of assistants support the diversity of teams? Can it support the relationship with diverse groups of parents and children?

Data were obtained by updating those of CoRe by means of a questionnaire that was sent to experts in the 15 countries involved. In addition, the experiences of 3 of these countries (Denmark, France, Slovenia) were enhanced with specific case studies. Here, we report that the main findings of the study referred to the possibility of creating CPD paths for ECEC assistants, with particular attention to the experiences described in the three case studies.

2 | WHAT COMES OUT AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL?

The general data stress the following aspects:

- The share of assistants in many EU countries is growing. In some countries (Denmark, France, Lithuania, Slovenia, UK) they represent up to 40%-50% of ECEC staff. If it is not accompanied by the creation of inclusive holistic

TABLE 1 Share of assistants in the countries selected for the study

Country	Age group	% Assistants
1. Belgium		
• Flemish-speaking part	2,5–6 years old	9,42%
	0–2,5 years old	0,4%
• French-speaking part	2,5–6 years old	8,9%
2. Denmark	0–6 years old	40%
3. France	0–2,5 years old	N.A.
	2,5–6 years old	50%
4. Greece	0–6 years old	N.A.
5. Ireland	0–6 years old	N.A.
6. Lithuania	0–6 years old	50%
7. The Netherlands	4–12 years old	2,76%
	0–4 years old	N.A.
8. Poland	2–6 years old	2%
9. Romania	0–7 years old	28%
10. Slovenia	0–7 years old	50%
11. Spain	0–6 years old	N.A.
12. Sweden	0–6 years old	N.A.
13. UK	0–6 years old	50%
14. Serbia	0–6 years old	0,22%
15. Germany	0–6 years old	11,1%

Note. N.A. = not available.

Source. Expert estimate.

competent systems, this growth could be led mainly by economic advantages, leading to a 'deprofessionalisation' of ECEC staff.

- The countries included in this study do not collect statistics about the assistants' socioeconomic or cultural background in their respective ECEC sectors. However, according to the national experts consulted in this study, the share of practitioners from an ethnic minority background may be higher among assistants than among core practitioners. The presence of assistants in the ECEC workforce contributes to its diversity, which may increase the ability of staff to effectively engage with the diversities and commonalities amongst children and families. In order to improve these aspects, a strong path of CPD during which practitioners reflect on their pedagogical practice under the supervision of pedagogical guidance is needed.
- Assistants often have low or no qualifications and few opportunities to take part in CPD paths. This creates a large gap between the work of practitioners/teachers and that of assistants, with a de-valuation of the assistants' job.
- Generally speaking, assistants do not have official competence profiles, either for their profession or for their training. The descriptions of competences in countries that do have them are often framed as technical or 'caring' tasks (sleeping time, eating, going to the toilet). This division of roles in which core practitioners are supposed to 'educate' (i.e., they focus on learning/cognitive activities), whilst assistants are thought to 'take care' of children (i.e., they focus on their physical well-being) could create a hierarchy between care and education, in line with the concept of 'schoolification' and against the holistic view on education that we would like to embrace (Van Laere, Peeters, & Vandenbroeck, 2012). An investment in adapted pathways towards a qualification and in a strong path of

continuous professional development, accompanied by pedagogical guidance could greatly advance the holistic approach of education and care that recognises the educative role of caring and the caring role of education (Hayes, 2007, 2008).

3 | ROLES AND TASKS

By taking a closer look at the roles of assistants in the analysed countries (where official competences profiles exist), the NESET II report points out significant trends: in Lithuania, teacher assistants (*Auklėtojos padėjėja*) are described as technical workers who are in charge of cleaning facilities, feeding children and other routines. In Romanian childcare centres and pre-schools, 'caregivers' (*Ingrijitoare*) work as 'assistants' alongside specialised medical nurses or pre-primary professionals. The caring staff is responsible for cleaning, supervising children, napping, snacking and taking children to the toilet. In Spain, assistants (*Técnico/técnica* or *Asistente en educación infantil*) help the other staff to give personal attention to pre-primary education pupils, especially concerning their hygiene, diet and general well-being. In Poland, teacher assistants (*Pomoc nauczyciela*) support pre-primary professionals (*Nauczyciel przedszkolny*) in providing hygiene routines, dressing children for the outdoors, etc. In England, a nursery assistant will usually work alongside and under the supervision of a core practitioner, organising materials, delivering parts of the lesson to children with special educational needs, helping individual children and helping with discipline. In some local governments in Greece, assistants (*Voithos nipiorefokomou/voithos vrefonipiokomou/voithos pedagogou*) have a clear professional competence profile, yet their role remains less specified at a national level because they do not yet have a status. In Denmark, Slovenia and Sweden, both core practitioners and assistants have a social pedagogical role which includes caring and teaching. The fact that these countries have a unitary system can partly explain why staff share roles. In countries like The Netherlands and France, assistants, besides playing a supportive role in technical and caring tasks, are also responsible for pedagogical-didactical tasks. With the presence of an assistant, more individual learning processes can be initiated in a class.

In a follow up study to CoRe, Van Laere et al. (2012) identify three distinct roles of assistants: 1) the teaching role: these assistants mainly contribute to children's better academic performance and help with their learning processes; 2) the bridging role: some assistants are asked to raise children's educational attainment by bridging the gap between schools and families and communities; and 3) the caring role: these assistants are responsible for children's hygiene, protection and emotional wellbeing so that their teacher can focus on what is perceived as the 'learning process'.

Considering these three possible roles, it becomes clear that:

1. In the countries analysed in this study, the caring role is always present (Urban et al., 2011). Assistants support pre-school teachers by assuming caring duties, freeing the core professional to focus on what is perceived to be 'real education', as if, once again, education and care could be divided following a non-holistic approach.
2. In some countries, such as Denmark, Greece, Ireland, The Netherlands, Sweden and the UK, assistants have a supporting role in the learning process of individual children (including those with special learning needs), whereas core practitioners have a teaching responsibility for the whole group. In Scandinavian countries, core practitioners have a social pedagogical role which encompasses learning and caring dimensions. Danish and Swedish assistants play a social-pedagogical role under the supervision of core practitioners.
3. In some countries, such as Belgium (FI), Serbia and Slovenia assistants also have a bridging role. They are largely from poor local communities or ethnic minority communities. They introduce their institution to families and local communities and favour the accessibility of services for vulnerable families. In Slovenia, Roma teaching assistants are also employed to raise the educational attainment of Roma children; in such cases, the bridging role is closely linked to the teaching role.

Compared to the learning and bridging roles, the caring role is usually less often addressed in policy documents, a consequence of the concept of schoolification of ECEC and the accompanying division between care and education. By focusing on children's cognitive and language development, their social and emotional development is given less

priority, reflecting a non-holistic approach. This is especially true in pre-schools (for 3–6-year-olds) that are increasingly perceived as a preparation for compulsory school.

In general, developing a professional identity can be difficult for assistants. They see themselves as having a role in ‘assisting’ teachers and, although they often take care of many daily aspects concerning children and families, the competences and experiences used for this are rarely valued or articulated as part of a distinctive professional profile (Van Laere et al., 2012). They are often perceived as ‘technical’ workers who deal with the ‘caring’ part of education in order to allow core practitioners to focus on ‘teaching’, which is seen as ‘real education’. It should be noted that, even in cases where regulations or workplace conditions recognise the position and competences of assistants, the risk remains that they may continue to be perceived as being simply technical workers. This current framework would clearly benefit from a reorientation towards the holistic view of education that gives voice to a real ‘educare’ approach. Investing in broad competence profiles for assistants in common CPD paths together with core practitioners and in adapted pathways towards qualification can help in this direction.

4 | POSSIBLE WAYS: EXAMPLES FROM THREE COUNTRIES

The 3 case studies (Denmark, France, Slovenia) of the NESET II report give examples of how to work towards competent systems that are capable of creating opportunities for assistants. Denmark is an example of adapted pathways towards qualification. France provides an adapted qualifying initial training for low-qualified professionals who wish to combine work and study. Slovenia offers an interesting example concerning the investment in continuous professional development for the whole staff.

4.1 | Denmark

Denmark has a unitary system of responsibility for children from birth to five years under the auspices of the Ministry for Children, Gender Equality, Integration and Social Affairs. Early childhood services are provided for all children and offer nearly universal coverage. Each child has the right to a place from the age of six months if their parents so wish (Jensen, 2016).

The staff of early childhood services consists of two professional groups: pedagogues and ‘pedagogical co-helpers’ (*pædagogmedhjælpere*). There is no clear distinction concerning their tasks or functions. One can say that pedagogues have overall responsibility, including the right to delegate pedagogical learning processes to the co-helpers. Almost all heads/leaders of the centres are qualified pedagogues.

Denmark has trained for the profession of pedagogue (*pædagog*) since 1992. In 1997, initial (optional) training for pedagogical assistants was created. From 2009, it was called the Pedagogical Assistant Training (*Pædagogisk Assistant Uddannelse, PAU*) which is a post-16 upper secondary vocational course.

There has been a continuous effort to raise the competence level of staff in ECEC centres and today 60% of the staff are pedagogues with a bachelor degree – a high share compared to many countries in Europe (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010), whilst 40% (assistants) are less or not qualified (Jensen, 2016). The education of pedagogues is a popular choice and an attractive profession among young people. Furthermore, there has been a tradition of having a specific education that is separate from school teachers, with a generic pedagogue professional core that is applicable not only for working in early childhood centres and out of school care, but also in many other welfare institutions. This generic approach has attracted a relatively large number of male students (currently 25% of the total, the highest percentage ever). Many start the profession as assistants and then begin the path towards a qualification as core practitioner.

In Denmark, working as an assistant can be seen as an important recruitment base for future pedagogue students. Most assistants are young people between the ages of 19 and 25 who want to spend a year or two working before beginning their studies. The job is popular with young people because it is quite well paid and is a responsible job with children (Jensen, 2016). Most pedagogue students were pedagogue co-helpers before taking up their studies.

In Denmark, the entry requirement to the qualification path as pedagogue is based on a quota system in which some places are reserved for experienced but untrained workers. These students are credited for their work experience, which makes this an interesting possibility for assistants. In addition, some University Colleges have a building-bridge course which is an access or pre-course for those from ethnic minority backgrounds. It emphasises language and literacy issues. Most of the students on these courses then enter pedagogue education which counts 5% of students from an ethnic minority background. The building-bridge course also represents an interesting pathway towards qualification for assistants, especially when considering that they are often from an ethnic minority background (Jensen, 2016).

4.2 | France

ECEC in France is organised in a split system (0 to 2,5 and 2,5 to 6) which is characterised by a great variety of professionals, each with different training (Thollon Behar & Mony, 2016). In childcare centres, there has recently been an increase in the number of unqualified or low-qualified workers (assistants: *aide auxiliaire CAP petite enfance (0 to 3)* and *ATSEM, agent territorial spécialisé des écoles maternelles*) who are expected to collaborate with qualified colleagues (core practitioners). In childcare centres, the law foresees that 40% of the staff must be qualified. The *auxiliaire CAP petite enfance* belongs to the latter category.

Because of the growing number of assistants, large investments are made to establish a shared culture among qualified and low-qualified workers. In 1988, the *Association des Collectifs Enfants Parents Professionnels (ACEPP)*, a national network of about 1,000 parent-led day care centres (*crèches parentales*) initiated a qualification process for its unqualified young employees: the EJE (*éducateur jeunes enfants*), a three-year post-secondary school diploma. From the start, it negotiated with policy makers on inclusive measures to enable youngsters who had previously dropped out to access higher education through the recognition of acquired competences (Thollon Behar & Mony, 2016). One of the partners in this network is the *Ecole de Santé Sociale du Sud-Est (ESSSE)* in Lyon which now offers special qualifying training to enable professionals with low qualifications (for example, assistants) to enter a graduating course and obtain the diploma of *éducateur jeunes enfants (EJE)* whilst remaining in their employment. In this case, there are specific opportunities and challenges in relating theory and practice, especially through an *analyse des pratiques* (analysis of daily practices) which enables students and professionals to share reflections on practice. ESSSE serves 85 regular students and an additional 30 'salaried students' every year.

There are two additional groups for salaried students: one to support writing capacities and one on computer use. Considering that some salaried students left school at an early age, these additional groups support them to improve their academic levels. During the training, a 'tutor', who is an educator in the employer's team (and thus a colleague at the workplace), accompanies the student and a 'reference trainer' supports the student in the training centre. Support is also given to the whole team in order to deal with the change in the professional identity of the assistants.

4.3 | Slovenia

Slovenia has established an integrated system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children aged one to six.

A preschool teacher and a preschool teacher's assistant make up the classroom staff. Preschool teachers should hold an advanced two-year studies qualification (ISCED level 5), a higher education degree (ISCED level 6) in preschool education or a university degree (ISCED level 7) in preschool education or some other field (pedagogy, humanities, sociology) with a specialisation in a programme for advanced training in education (Vonta, 2016). The required qualification for assistants is an upper secondary vocational qualification in preschool education (ISCED 3) or general upper secondary school and a pass in a vocational course on working with preschool children. Additionally, in environments with Roma children, a Roma assistant should be involved in preschools and primary schools. Roma assistants are not required to hold an ISCED level 3 qualification, but they need to have followed certain paths (e.g., knowledge of the language) (Vonta, 2016).

The main investment in Slovenia has been in CPD paths for the whole staff in order to value team diversity through a democratic approach based on negotiation amongst staff members (discussion together on observations and videos; planning and documenting together; creating co-reflection moments on daily situations, etc.). Slovenia is one of the few European countries in which this is foreseen for the whole staff, including assistants: both teachers and teacher assistants are obliged to participate in five days of training per year. Moreover, assistants and teachers are entitled to non-contact time to prepare, plan and evaluate activities together (Vonta, 2016). This gives a fundamental opportunity to the staff to grow together, taking into account their differences (in qualification, social and ethnic background, etc.). When time and support for common reflection are foreseen, staff can 'think' about their practice, change it if necessary and improve it through reflection. As Vonta underlines (2016, p. 82), 'work in early childhood classrooms is an integrated activity, and in the child's best interest we cannot separate it into education, care, health, eating, resting, etc. In order to implement all those activities in an integrated manner, staff have to have opportunities for analysing, discussing, negotiating, making agreements, planning and coordinating professional issues and the division of labour amongst themselves'.

If we summarise, we can conclude that these three examples show how it can be possible to create:

- Specific adapted pathways that give assistants the possibility of improving their qualification, making it possible to combine work and study by: a) creating specific quota systems in which a certain number of places on a bachelor training course is reserved for experienced but unqualified workers; b) building-bridge courses for those from an ethnic minority background and with a low socioeconomic status; c) recognising previously acquired competences; d) repeatedly relating theory to practice during studies supporting the team that the assistant works with to help them all to cope with the change of professional identity the assistant-student may experience over the course of the training.
- CPD opportunities for all staff, including assistants. This requires investment in: a) child-free hours for core practitioners and assistants; b) meetings to reflect together on their pedagogical practice; c) a system of pedagogical guidance or coaching; and d) a system of monitoring that guarantees that assistants can follow the established CPD.

5 | DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy commitment to ECEC at the European level is characterised by a recognition that the ECEC system must be of high quality. The ECEC system is clearly seen as deeply connected to a professional and competent workforce, inscribed in a 'competent system' (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). Investment in this direction is lacking at the European level. Despite international research showing the ability of well-trained and well-paid staff to ensure the quality of ECEC (Oberhuemer et al., 2010; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008), in many countries in Europe, ECEC staff is still under-qualified and there is too little investment in strong CPD paths for all staff.

Considering the position and roles of ECEC assistants, the NESET II report included the following conclusions and recommendations:

In split, but also in unitary systems, a hierarchy between care and education often exists, in line with the concept of 'schoolification'. We argue that this may be reinforced by the divided roles between core practitioners and assistants. The fact that assistants are predominantly viewed as technical workers with caring duties has two major and interconnected consequences. First, it means that caring tasks are considered to be of lower value than education (Ortlipp, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011), and the educational value of these caring activities may even be denied. Second, it also implies that a narrow view of education (as 'formalised learning') prevails. This results in a separation of care and education (even in some 'integrated' or 'unitary' systems) and therefore undermines the holistic approach to young children's education. It seems that in several countries assistants take care of the physical needs of

children who are thought to distract other students from what is considered 'real learning' and interfering with the 'real' task of the teacher or educator. This decontextualised approach to learning may result in situations when during crucial moments – contact with parents, meal time, and free playtime among peers – low or unqualified assistants are solely responsible, thereby downgrading the educational value of these moments. In other words, 'care' has come to be seen as a simple matter that 'women naturally do' and which does not require any specific training or professional development. Important interactions such as feeding, putting children to bed and accompanying them to the toilet are stripped of their educational value. These perceptions reduce education to cognitive development, leading to a lack of continuity in the child's care and education (Van Laere et al., 2012).

Recommendations

Policies on ECEC should focus on the integration of care and education across institutional, regional and national levels.

Assistants, together with the other ECEC stakeholders (practitioners, parents, local communities, schools, training institutions, local, regional, and national governments, and European policy-makers), should be involved in the development of a holistic view of education which should be integrated throughout the curricula, competence profiles, initial training and continuous professional development.

- Assistants are an 'invisible' part of the ECEC workforce, meaning they often do not appear in official policy documents, although in some of the countries for which statistics are available, their number is quite high (40% to 50% of the staff). Besides, none of the countries involved in the study has produced statistics about the sociocultural background and the gender of assistants, although the case studies show that they are an important tool to diversify the workforce in ECEC.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should make this part of the workforce visible by:

- 1) Collecting data on the number of assistants in the ECEC workforce;
- 2) Collecting data on their sociocultural background and gender;
- 3) Including assistants in all policy documents that refer to staff in the ECEC sector.
- 4) Including data on assistants in all international reports and studies (OECD's, TALIS for ECEC, etc.) that refer to ECEC staff.

- Assistants have low or no qualifications and few possibilities of job mobility. There is a need to develop adapted pathways to qualification for them, making it possible to combine work and study. They do not necessarily need to have a specific initial qualification when they start working, but once they are hired, they must have opportunities of job mobility through adapted pathways towards qualification. A competent system should facilitate and motivate assistants in obtaining a qualification. Specific quota systems in which a certain number of places of bachelor training are reserved for experienced but unqualified workers have proven to be successful in Denmark. Similarly, building-bridge courses for those from ethnic minority backgrounds and with a low socioeconomic status are supportive. Language and literacy barriers should be taken into account. In this pathway to qualification, assistant-students should be able to benefit from the recognition of earlier acquired competences. Support from specialised mentors is crucial; they should help by vigilantly identifying links between theory and practice. The assistant-students and the

team in which they work need support to deal with the progressive change of the assistants' professional identity during training.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should create pathways to the same level of qualification as the core practitioners, paying special attention to:

- 1) Recognising assistants' work experience and previously acquired competences;
- 2) Linking theory and practice through group reflections on practice;
- 3) Foreseeing pedagogical guidance for student-assistants and the whole team during this pathway to qualification;
- 4) Supporting students from an ethnic minority background and with a low socioeconomic status.

- The job of assistant is also important in the widespread effort to attract more male educators. Male trainees benefit from being in contact with male core practitioners (Peeters, 2013). In Denmark, attempts to motivate young male assistants to start training as a pedagogue have raised their number. This can be partly attributed to the Danish generalist approach to pedagogue's initial training which attracts more men because graduates of the course have more possibilities of moving between different pedagogical fields during their careers. From other studies, we know that other European countries, such as Norway, follow the same trend (Peeters, 2013).

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should create pathways to qualification designed to attract male assistants and place them in networks with other male educators. Employment offices should attract young males to the profession of assistant, then guide them towards a qualification as core practitioners.

Although concrete data about assistants' ethnic-cultural and socio-economic background are lacking, the experts underline that many assistants, especially in larger cities, are from an ethnic-minority background or have a low socioeconomic status. Employing assistants can thus be important to increase the diversity of the ECEC workforce. Assistants can also play a significant role in connecting staff with vulnerable families or families from an ethnic-minority background.

Recommendations

Member States should invest in hiring a diverse workforce in ECEC services in terms of language, gender and socio-cultural background. This diverse workforce needs to be accompanied by pedagogical guidance.

There is a need for competent systems in which a good initial training for core practitioners and adapted pathways to qualification for assistants are combined with the possibility to constantly reflect on their practice. This can be best achieved via continuous professional development for all staff.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should invest in establishing continuous professional development for all staff, including assistants. In order to deliver, there must be:

- ✓ Child-free hours for core practitioners and assistants: contracts should guarantee an amount of paid hours without children during which core practitioners and assistants can reflect on their practice;
- ✓ Meetings to reflect together on pedagogical practice: planning, observations and documentation. These meetings should include all member of the team;
- ✓ A system of pedagogical guidance or coaching that supports the team in their reflection;
- ✓ A system of monitoring of the CPD that guarantees that assistants are able to follow the established CPD opportunities.

- Assistants can find it difficult to develop a professional identity: they often see themselves as 'assisting' teachers, and although they often perform necessary daily tasks for and with children and their families, the competences and experiences they draw upon are rarely valued, nor are they articulated as part of a distinctive professional profile. Indeed, it is often the case that assistants do not have a professional and training competence profile. While important to create, the profiles should not necessarily be too specific. Overly detailed profiles might inhibit innovation and adaptation. Therefore, broad competence profiles need to be developed, leaving room for interpretation.

Recommendations

Member States need to develop professional competences profiles and training competences profiles for assistants that are defined in broad terms and are based on a holistic view of children's educational needs.

- ECEC professionals (core practitioners and assistants) need to have complex socio-pedagogical competences. ECEC quality cannot be seen as an achievable fixed point. Rather, it should be interpreted as an on-going contextualised process through negotiation. EU countries need a workforce that is capable of dealing with differences and commonalities between people by valorising them. ECEC staff should reflect on their practice in order to increase the quality of the services. Staff, both assistants and core professionals, require pedagogical guidance to effectively do so.

Recommendations

Initial training and continuous professional development both need to focus on broad socio-pedagogical competences to prepare staff for a diverse workplace.

To conclude, ECEC quality is strongly linked to a competent and motivated staff who need to be recognised and valorised. ECEC assistants need to be 'visible', to grow in their competences with the support of their teams and to have opportunities for qualification, job mobility and continuous professional development. This is what a competent system driven by a holistic approach requires in a context of increasing diversity.

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NOTES

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² For more information: <http://nesetweb.eu/en/>

³ The countries involved were: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands.

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