Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care

A Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture

CoRe

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CoRe

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Public open tender EAC 14/2009
issued by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture

Final Report

University of East London, Cass School of Education
and
University of Ghent, Department for Social Welfare Studies

London and Ghent, September 2011

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1 Introduction

There is a broad consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that the quality of early childhood services – and ultimately the outcomes for children and families – depends on well-educated, experienced and 'competent' staff. But what exactly makes a competent early childhood practitioner? How can *competence* be understood, and its development supported, in the highly complex and demanding field of working professionally with young children, families and communities? What approaches do different countries take, and what lessons can be learnt from practices developed by practitioners, training institutions and policymakers across Europe?

This report presents the findings of a European research project jointly conducted by the University of East London (UEL) and the University of Ghent (UGent). The 'study on competence requirements in early childhood education and care' (CoRe) explored conceptualisations of 'competence' and professionalism in early childhood practice, and identified systemic conditions for developing, supporting and maintaining competence in all layers of the early childhood system. The European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture commissioned the research conducted between January 2010 and May 2011. In the light of the research findings, and intensive consultation with key stakeholders in ECEC in Europe, CoRe has developed *policy recommendations*, which are also part of this report.

The CoRe research team at London and Ghent was supported by an international expert advisory team and collaborated closely with three key European and international professional networks: Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET), International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and Children in Europe (CiE). These networks represent the field of ECEC in all EU27 / EFTA-ETA / states and candidate countries. In addition, a fourth international professional network (Education International) has shared expertise with the project, bringing in its strong workforce and teaching unions' perspective. Locally-based but internationally renowned researchers contributed hugely to the project by providing critical insights into the policies of their countries and through case studies of interesting practices situated in different European locations.

The aim of CoRe is to provide policy-relevant information, advice and case studies with regard to the competences required for the ECEC workforce and how to support competence development from a systemic perspective. In order to achieve its aims, CoRe has conducted original research, reviewed previous work and international literature, and consulted with experts in the field over a period of 15 months. In this report, we present the findings of the different but interrelated strands of this process which underpin the policy recommendations regarding systemic competence development and professionalisation in early childhood education and care in Europe. By providing informed views on the questions at stake we hope to initiate discussion, to provoke new thinking, and to encourage new questions.

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1.1 Acknowledgements

The CoRe project could count on an international expert advisory board, who shared with us their experience of landmark international studies (Starting Strong, SEEPRO, Care Work in Europe) and helped to orient our discussion. The board consisted of Pamela Oberhuemer (SEEPRO, Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik, Munich), Dr Claire Cameron (Care Work in Europe, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London), Dr John Bennett (Author of Starting Strong I + II, OECD, 2001,2006; Caring and Learning together, UNESCO, 2010; Paris, France) and Prof. Linda Miller (Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom, editor of several books on professionalism in ECEC).

Representatives of international professional networks (DECET, ISSA, CiE, Education International) made sure our discussions, while reaching the necessary critical level, were always grounded in real-life experiences of organisations and professionals working towards achieving change on the local level: Ana del Barrio Saiz (DECET), Anke van Keulen (DECET), Carmen Anghelescu (ISSA), Colette Murray (DECET), Dr Dawn Tankersly (ISSA), Dennis Sinyolo (Education International), Mihaela Ionescu (ISSA), Myriam Mony (DECET), Nives Milinovic (ISSA / Children in Europe), Regina Sabaliauskiene (ISSA), Dr Tatjana Vonta (ISSA), Teresa Ogrodzinska (Children in Europe) and Stig Lund (Children in Europe).

Researchers conducting the case studies provided inspiring valuable 'practice-based evidence' (Urban, 2010) for policymakers and researchers in Europe: Dr Claire Cameron (Care Work in Europe, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London), Fanika Balič (Vrtec Pobrežje Maribor, Slovenia), Jerneja Jager (Educational Research Institute, Slovenia), Jytte Juul Jensen (College of Pedagogy Århus, Denmark), Prof. Linda Miller (Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom), Mariacristina Picchio (ISTC-CNR, Rome), Marie Paule Thollon Behar (Ecole Rockefeller de Lyon - Université Lumière Lyon 2, France), Monika Rosciszewska Wozniak (Comenius Foundation for Child Development, Poland), Myriam Mony (ESSSE Lyon, France), Olav Zylicz (Warsaw School of Psychology, Poland), Sonja Rutar (Educational Research Institute and Faculty of Education Koper, Slovenia), Steven Brandt (University of Ghent, Belgium), Susanna Mayer (ISTC-CNR-Rome, Italy), Dr Tatjana Vonta (DRCEI-Lublijana, Slovenia) and Dr Tullia Musatti (ISTC-CNR-Rome, Italy).

Researchers, locally-based but internationally connected, provided their expertise of local and national developments and responded to our endless queries while we conducted the survey: Dr Ana Ancheta Arrabal (Departamento de Educación Comparada, Universitat de Valencia, Spain), Ana del Barrio Saiz (Bureau Mutant, the Netherlands), Anna Tornberg (Lärarförbundet, Sweden), Anke van Keulen (Bureau Mutant), Carmen Anghelescu (CEDP Step by Step, Romania), Dr Claire Cameron (Care Work in Europe, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London), Colette Murray (Pavee Point and EDeNn, Ireland), Prof. Dr Florence Pirard (Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance / Université de Liège, Belgium), Helena Buric (Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia), Mariacristina Picchio (ISTC-CNR, Rome), Marie Paule Thollon Behar (Ecole Rockefeller de Lyon - Université Lumière Lyon 2, France), Dr. Natassa Papaprokopiou (Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Greece), Nives Milinovic (Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia), Pascale Camus (Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance / Université de Liège, Belgium), Regina Sabaliauskiene (Centre for Innovative Education, Lithuania), Dr Tatjana Vonta (DRCEI-Lublijana, Slovenia), Teresa Ogrodzinska (Comenius Foundation for Child Development, Poland), Dr Tullia Musatti (ISTC-CNR-Rome, Italy) and Stig Lund (BUPL).

We also benefited from contributions from the following colleagues in the field: Dr Armand De Meyer (Belgium), Caroline Detavernier (University college Arteveldehogeschool, Belgium), Frank Jansma and Natalie van der Veen (Stichting Beroepskwaliteit Leraren en ander onderwijspersoneel, the Netherlands), Geert Keersmaekers (Kind & Gezin, Belgium), Jasna Krstovic (University of Rijeka, Faculty of Teacher Education, Croatia), Jeanine Vandenbroucke, (Vlaams Welzijnsverbond, Belgium), Johanna Mahieu (DVO De Blauwe Lelie, Belgium), Karin Van Hijfte (CVO De Oranjerie, Belgium), Laura Franceschini (Centro Nascita Montessori, Italy), Lien Coppens (University College Hogeschool Ghent, Belgium), Lien Werbrouck (University College Karel De Grote-Hogeschool, Belgium), Dr. Malgorzata Zytko (University of Warsaw, Faculty of Education, Poland), Massimo Mari (Confederazione Generale Italiana Lavoro, Italy), Mieke Daems (CEGO, Belgium), Monique van Gerwen and Kristiaan Hillen (FCB Dienstverlenen in Arbeidsmarktvraagstukken Kinderopvang, the Netherlands) and Prof. Dr. Susanna Mantovani (Università Di Milano Bicocca, Italy).

Our special thanks go to Pamela Oberhuemer (SEEPRO, Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik, Munich) for her time and commitment, and for providing a critical review of our survey based on her own research experiences from the SEEPRO study.

Regarding the literature review we particularly thank Dr Claire Cameron (Care Work in Europe, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London); Helena Buric (Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia) and Nives Milinovic (Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia) for their contribution.

We are particularly grateful to Nora Milotay, Adam Pokorny and the team of the Directorate General for Education and Culture for their commitment to this work and for an excellent collaboration over the period of this study. Their openness to our approach and framework, and their constructive way of engaging in critical discussions, has contributed hugely to shaping this report.

Last, but not least, the CORE project would not have been possible without the commitment of practitioners, educators, pedagogistas, trainers and lecturers, parents and children who gave their time to participate in focus groups, respond to interview questions and share their knowledge, experiences and points of view with us. It is impossible to name them all individually but we would like to express our sincere thanks for their contributions.

2 Project rationale and objectives

The present study is grounded in international research on quality, competences and professionalism in early childhood. At European level, 14 Member States and one candidate country were included in a survey, and seven detailed case studies were conducted. Recommendations for action in the various layers of the early childhood system, including the level of European policy, have been developed.

As detailed in the Terms of Reference for this tender, the specific objectives of the project were:

1. To produce a summary of current evidence about the competences required by ECEC staff, based on a systematic, comprehensive and critical literature review.

2. To provide a comprehensive summary of the competences that countries require their ECEC staff to possess based on definitions in relevant national legislations and policy documents.

3. To provide a description of competences taught in a geographically balanced sample of training programmes that lead to qualifications required for work in ECEC services, including countries that have no legislation on competence requirements.

4. To conduct seven case studies of ECEC policy and provision in a geographically balanced sample, emphasising high-quality programmes and analysing staff competences contributing to the quality of provision.

5. To propose a definition of the core competences that all ECEC staff require in order to contribute to a high-quality ECEC service.

6. To develop recommendations for actions that should be taken at national and European level.

The analysis of the findings of objectives 1, 2 and 3 of the project, together with experiences gathered in the case studies (objective 4) and the survey of actual competence profiles for the ECEC workforce across Europe, has enabled us to 'map' areas of policy and practice where action can and should be taken. These areas have been discussed with key actors in the field (as represented by the collaborators of this project), and have led to recommendations for policy and practice to

- promote professionalism in early childhood across all layers of the professional system, including practice, management, qualification and training, and research

- improve pre- and in-service training of the ECEC workforce

- develop an understanding of qualification requirements for the ECEC workforce that shares common values and respects the diversity of possible approaches to realize them across Europe.

3 Methodology

In order to ensure the highest quality of the research, CoRe has adopted a multi-method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The study is based on a literature review of international policy documents and academic publications, a survey among experts in this field in 15 EU countries, and a series of seven in-depth case studies. It also builds on previous work in this domain, particularly on 'Care Work in Europe' (Cameron & Moss, 2007) and SEEPRO (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neumann, 2010).

Three key activities, or project stages, developed and conducted by CoRe inform each other:

1. **A comprehensive *literature review***

   The *literature review* provides a summary of the current international discussion about the competences required by ECEC staff. As the dominant academic literature uses English as its lingua franca, and the debate is dominated by research conducted in English-speaking countries, to overcome the limitations of a discourse in one dominant language, we have complemented the review with a broader array of European insights, and with Croatian, Danish, Dutch, French, German and Italian literature on the topic.

2. **A *survey* to explore competence profiles in 15 European countries**

   The *survey* complements existing overviews of ECEC professions in the 27 EU countries (i.e. the SEEPRO study) by adding information about formal professional competence requirements and formal competence requirements used in initial training, as well as critical commentaries on the content and the use of these profiles by experts in 15 countries. Countries in a geographically balanced sample included in this survey were Belgium (Flemish- and French-speaking communities), Croatia (as a candidate state), Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom (England and Wales).

3. **A set of *in-depth case studies* of interesting practices in seven European locations**

   The seven *case studies*, which explored a wide variety of practices, were selected for the possibilities they offer to consider different pathways towards systemic professionalisation of the early childhood workforce. The case studies were conducted by local experts, based in the countries of the selected cases.

Since the data sources for the study varied widely (e.g. in terms of *format*, *purpose*, *addressees*) it was most important to *contextualise* them in order to allow for meaningful comparison (Krippendorff, 2004). Instead of solely relying on published documents, we consulted with experts from three key professional networks that represent all EU27 / EFTA-EEA / candidate countries. Continuous consultation with the field was a key feature of the entire research process and was facilitated through e-mail and internet telephony (Skype™), but also through face-to-face meetings.

3.1 Limitations of the study

Given the constraints of time and budget, it was not possible to study all aspects of the competences required for the early childhood workforce in Europe. One of the important aspects that remained underdeveloped is the issue of *family day carers* or child minders. In some parts of Europe (e.g. France and Belgium) they constitute the largest part of the care and education workforce for the youngest children (from birth to the age of three), and few formal competences or qualifications are required. In many countries they work in very difficult conditions, with limited educational support and low income. As a consequence, professional mobility (both horizontal and vertical) is virtually impossible for them. In short, it is a largely undervalued workforce, all too often considered as 'what women naturally do', that deserves particular attention with regard to its professionalism and could be the subject of a separate study.

Likewise, we are aware that *gender issues* are not fully covered in this study. The early childhood workforce has been and continues to be mostly female. Considering that the workforce will have to grow considerably in order to meet the EU policy goal of accessibility of ECEC for all, it will become increasingly necessary to attract more men into the early childhood workforce. It will be important to study examples of good practice (e.g. in Norway and Denmark, but also in some parts of Germany, Scotland and other places) in order to explore how gender issues might proactively be introduced to the diverse professionalisation pathways described in this report.

4 Early Childhood in a changing EU policy context

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been, since the 1992 Council Recommendations on Child Care, a recurring topic on European policy agendas. Over this period of time, however, a progressive shift of focus can be noticed. Whereas initially the rationale for investing in early childhood education and care was mostly driven by socio-economic concerns about employment, competitiveness and gender equality, more recently EU policy documents point to children's rights, questions of citizenship, equality of educational opportunity, and social cohesion (EC communication, 2011; Europe 2020, 2010a; Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training, 2010).

From an economic perspective ECEC policies at European level are driven by common concern to ensure a *smart, sustainable and inclusive* economic growth.

> *'Europe faces a moment of transformation. The crisis has wiped out years of economic and social progress and exposed structural weaknesses in Europe's economy. In the meantime, the world is moving fast and long-term challenges – globalisation, pressure on resources, ageing – intensify. The EU must now take charge of its future'.*
> (European Commission, 2010a, p. 3)

The EU 2020 strategy is an acknowledgement that yesterday's solutions will not suffice to resolve the crisis and 'put Europe back on track'. Knowledge base and innovation, sustainability and social cohesion cannot be developed in isolation. The priorities are mutually dependent. Against this background, coherent approaches to education, training and lifelong learning are seen as of particular importance for 'improving citizens' employability, social inclusion and personal fulfilment' (Council of the European Union, 2010a). Moreover, ECEC services are seen as a means to deal with the demographic challenges of an ageing population (European Commission, 2001b), to create employment by increasing women's labour market participation and as a measure to promote gender equality by reconciling work and family responsibilities (European Commission, 2007a, 2007d, 2009a). At the Barcelona summit in 2002, the need to increase the number of childcare places was acknowledged, and quantitative targets agreed: Member States agreed to provide childcare places for 33% of children up to the age of three and 90% of children from three to mandatory school age by 2010. Despite an overall increase in the provision of pre-school education over the last few years, many countries still struggle to meet the 'Barcelona targets', especially for children under three years of age (European Commission, 2009a). The new benchmarks state that by 2020 at least 95% of children between four and compulsory school age should participate in early childhood education (Council of the European Union, 2009a; European Commission, 2009b, p.74). Furthermore, early childhood services form a considerable part of the labour market: they often recruit their workforce from groups that are specifically targeted by the education and training strategic framework. One of the main targets of the EU 2020 strategy is to ensure that 75% of 20-64-year-olds are employed (European Commission, 2010a). In this context, ECEC is not only seen as a prerequisite for employment, but also as a source of employment. There is a growing need for care work and this will lead to shortages on the European labour market in the decades to come, unless the status of the care work force is raised and men as well as women join this work force (Cameron & Moss, 2007; European Commission, 2007a).

From this economic perspective the concern is mainly about quantitative aspects of accessibility and availability of ECEC. Over the last two decades, however, the issue of quality has gained importance from an educational perspective.

From an educational perspective the expansion of good-quality early childhood institutions is seen as indispensable for the educational attainment of the children and for the foundation of lifelong learning*:*

> *'ECEC has a crucial role to play in laying the foundations for improved competences of future EU citizens, enabling us to create a more skilled workforce capable of contributing and adjusting to technological change. There is clear evidence that participation in high-quality ECEC leads to significantly better attainment in international tests on basic skills, such as PISA and PIRLS.'*
>
> (European Commission, 2011b, p. 1)

In February 2010 the Commission evaluated the Lisbon Strategy and stated that progress in increasing youth educational attainment levels had been too slow, with outcomes only improving moderately since 2000 (European Commission, 2010b). In this regard, one of the five main EU targets is to reduce the number of early school leavers to below 10% (European Commission, 2010a). In order to reach this target, the council endorsed the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020) in May 2009, and implemented an updated set of benchmarks for 2010-20. The early childhood sector has the potential to play an important role in meeting the benchmarks of the ET 2020 programme: to reduce the number of early leavers of education, to raise the number of young people in higher education, and to increase the participation in lifelong learning with regard to its workforce (Council of the European Union, 2009a). In the forthcoming decade, the importance of education, including pre-primary education, will be further underlined by these benchmarks.

Several longitudinal studies show the impact of early years education on later achievement, provided the ECEC is of high quality, and hence the increased importance of what constitutes quality in this context.

From a social perspective, the benefits of high-quality ECEC are particularly salient for children who live in disadvantaged families (European Commission, 2008a, 2008b; Council of the European Union, 2010a; European Commission, 2011b). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is explicitly recognised in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. From human rights and children's rights perspectives it is important that all children have the same access to high-quality provision: ECEC can make an important contribution to breaking the cycles of poverty and discrimination (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Eurydice, 2009; Leseman, 2009). Children who are most at risk will more probably be in the lowest-quality classrooms when quantitative benchmarks are not accompanied by qualitative targets (LoCasale-Crouch, et al., 2007). One of the five main targets of the EU 2020 strategy is that 20 million fewer people should be at risk of poverty (European Commission, 2010a). Good-quality, accessible ECEC services can contribute to this target. The ET 2020 framework promotes generalised equitable access in pre-primary education, and the quality of provision and teacher support (Council of the European Union, 2009a). According to the Council of the European Union, participation in high-quality early childhood education and care, with highly-skilled staff and adequate child-to-staff ratios, produces positive results for all children and has the

greatest benefits for the most disadvantaged. Providing adequate incentives and support, adapting provision to needs and increasing accessibility can broaden the participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Council of the European Union, 2009b, 2010a).

5 Structure of the report

This final report presents key concepts, key findings and policy recommendations of the CoRe research. For each project phase (literature review, survey, case studies), a detailed research document was produced and discussed with project participants, an expert advisory team and the Directorate-General of Education and Culture. In addition we asked Pamela Oberhuemer (SEEPRO, Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik, Munich) to provide a concise report to link the relevant findings of the SEEPRO research project regarding formal training requirements for ECEC staff to the CoRe study. These original research documents form the basis of the annexes to this final report: Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Peeters, J., Lazzari, A., Van Laere, K. (2011) *CoRe. Competence requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care.* Research documents commissioned by the European Commission, DG Education and Culture.

6 Key terms and concepts

6.1 Competence

The quality of ECEC depends on the competence of people working with children, families and communities. Often, we associate the term 'competence' with the qualities of an individual practitioner, something that can be acquired through training and professional preparation (i.e. the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivation, …). The difficulty with this concept is that it is rather narrow. Especially in the English language context, 'being competent' (a fully human attribute) is often reduced to 'competencies' – a series of skills and pieces of knowledge that individuals need to 'possess' in order to perform a particular task.

A key finding of CoRe is that 'competence' in the early childhood education and care context has to be understood as a characteristic of the entire early childhood system. The *competent system* develops in reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context. A key feature of a 'competent system' is its support for individuals to realise their capability to develop responsible and responsive practices that respond to the needs of children and families in ever-changing societal contexts. At the level of the individual practitioner, being and becoming 'competent' is a continuous process that comprises the capability and ability to build on a body of professional *knowledge*, *practice* and develop and show professional *values*. Although it is important to have a 'body of knowledge' and 'practice', practitioners and teams also need *reflective competences* as they work in highly complex, unpredictable and diverse contexts. A 'competent system' requires possibilities for *all* staff to engage in joint learning and critical reflection. This includes sufficient *paid* time for these activities. A competent system includes collaborations between individuals and teams, institutions (pre-schools, schools, support services for children and families…) as well as 'competent' governance at policy level.

6.2 Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

There has been some debate on how to label the provisions for children under compulsory school age and their families. In this report, we use the term 'Early Childhood Education and Care' (ECEC) for pragmatic reasons, since it is the term most commonly used in international and European policy documents, as well as in OECD reports. In English-speaking countries, the term *education and care* is used to open the limitations of both terms that are perceived as complementary, yet at the same time separate. *Education* is therefore understood as something to do with learning in more formalised settings (Urban, 2009), whereas *care* alludes to 'what women do, unpaid in the home for children' (Cameron & Moss, 2007). Both conceptualisations are narrow as they do not give account of the complexity of work with young children and their families. In everyday pedagogical practices, which encompass education in its broadest sense, aspects of education and care are deeply intertwined. The use of ECEC in this report should therefore not be understood as simply adding one to the other (education + care). ECEC refers to a holistic approach to education, resonating with the social pedagogical perspective prevailing in Scandinavian literature and the German concept of *Bildung*. This signals that we insist that explicit caring tasks such as nurturing, feeding or putting to bed are educational in nature, that we consider *learning* to be about developing cognitive, motor,

emotional, social, creative and other aspects of the child, and that supporting learning requires a caring attitude and behaviour.

We need to be aware that ECEC institutions vary substantially from one country to another. These variations heavily influence prevailing concepts of professionalism and core competences.

Authors who have mapped out professionalism within the ECEC systems in Europe and in the OECD countries differentiate between the so-called 'split systems' and 'unitary systems' (Bennett, 2003; European Commission, 2011b; Moss, 2003; Oberhuemer, 2005; Oberhuemer & Ullich, 1997; OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 2010). The split system model, in which childcare for the youngest children (under three or four years old) and the kindergarten for older children (up to compulsory school age) are separate, is common in Europe. It exists in Belgium, France, Italy, Luxemburg, Portugal, the Netherlands, Greece and Ireland. In Denmark, Finland, Sweden, New Zealand, Spain and, recently also in England and Scotland, policymakers have moved towards a unitary system where provision for the youngest children is integrated into either the educational system – as in New Zealand, Spain, England, Scotland and Sweden – or a broader 'pedagogic' system, such as in Finland and Denmark. The integration of childcare into a broader entity assumes a unitary structure and a shared approach to access, subsidies, curriculum and personnel (Moss, 2005, p. 4). To add to the complexity, the divide between age groups and institutions (childcare / preschool) is often not the only divide in the early childhood system. In 'split' systems in particular, services tend to be fragmented, with different types of services (e.g. public, private, private-for-profit) existing in parallel.

Various authors have indicated that this differentiation between a 'split system' and a 'unitary' system has important consequences for the professionalism of the staff members who work with the youngest children (from birth to three or four) (Bennett, 2005; Moss, 2005; Oberhuemer, 2000, 2005). According to the OECD, it is typical of the 'split regimes' that highly qualified and well-paid teachers work in the kindergartens, whereas childcare children up to the age of three is taken care of by personnel with lower or no formal qualifications who are paid significantly less (OECD, 2006, p. 161). 'Early childhood educators working closest to the school gate are better trained and rewarded' (OECD, 2006, p. 158). The professionalisation of family day carers, however, remains a problem, even within unitary systems. The educational level and working conditions of family day carers are not as good as those of staff who work in group care.

A low level of professionalism within group care for the youngest children (from birth to three or four) is inherent in the so-called split systems where childcare and kindergarten are separate from each other. France is an exception to the rule. The French example of the *éducateur jeunes enfants* (graduate level) demonstrates that it is possible to develop a high degree of professionalism within a split system (Peeters, 2008). Most problems concerning professionalism within this model can be found in the private commercial childcare sector. Some examples (e.g. from New Zealand and the Netherlands) show, however, that it is possible to raise the level of professionalism in the 'for-profit' sector if centres receive substantial support from governments and/or the business community (Mitchell, 2002).

6.3 Quality

As outlined above, the policy commitment to ECEC at European level is characterised by the recognition that the provision has to be of high quality. But what constitutes high quality in ECEC is complex, and often a contradictory matter: definitions of quality and strategies to ensure it vary considerably across countries (NESSE, 2009). A rich body of literature provides evidence of an ongoing international debate that, since the 1990s, has critically argued about what exactly the aspects of the quality construct are, how they are related, and how they can best be evaluated and developed (e.g. Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, 2007; Pence & Moss, 1994; Penn, 2011). Any discussion on quality in ECEC should be contextualised: it should encompass the regular review of understandings and practices for the improvement of services in ever-changing societal conditions (NESSE, 2009). Consequently, quality needs to be considered as an on-going *process* rather than as something that is achieved or not.

The OECD has been a main actor in drawing attention to the importance of quality early childhood services and systems. The Starting Strong reports (OECD, 2001, 2006) place the question of quality in the context of democratic ECEC governance. The reports recommend actors

- To formulate regulatory standards for all forms of provision, supported by co-ordinated investment.
- To promote participatory processes in defining and ensuring quality. Beyond the minimum standard ensured by the basic regulations, defining and assuring quality should be a participatory and democratic process, involving different groups including children, parents, families and professionals who work with children. Participatory approaches can take many forms. Starting Strong (OECD, 2001) recommended two policy approaches:
    - In consultation with stakeholders, to generate a guiding curriculum framework for the country that focuses on the norms and values governing early education and care.
    - Monitoring that engages and supports staff, parents, and children.
      (OECD, 2006, p. 126)

The 2006 Starting Strong II report re-emphasises the necessity of democratic, participatory approaches to defining and evaluating quality. It also offers a coherent framework for the different aspects of quality – again from the perspective of overall ECEC governance. The framework describes quality as constructed from seven interrelated elements:

> *Orientation quality*
> the type and level of attention that a government brings to early childhood policy, e.g. through national legislation, regulation and policy initiatives […]
>
> *Structural quality*
> Primarily a responsibility of administrations, it refers to the overarching structures needed to ensure quality in early childhood programmes, and is ensured by the clear formulation and enforcement of legislation or regulations. Structural requirements may define the quality of the physical environment for young children (buildings, space, outdoors, pedagogical materials); the quality and training levels of the staff; an appropriate curriculum properly

trialled, and covering all the broad areas of child development; acceptable child-staff ratios; adequate work conditions and compensation of staff, etc. […]

Educational concept and practice
The educational concept and practice of centres are generally guided by the national curriculum framework which sets out the key goals of the early childhood system. These goals differ widely from country to country, and no doubt from decade to decade, but a common conviction is emerging across countries that lead staff need to be trained to a high level to achieve the broad goals of early childhood programming […]

Interaction or process quality
The warmth and quality of the pedagogical relationship between educators and children, the quality of interaction between children themselves, and the quality of relationships within the educator team figure among the process goals most frequently cited. […]

Operational quality
In particular, management that focuses on responsiveness to local need, quality improvement and effective team building: operational quality is maintained by leadership that motivates and encourages working as a team and information sharing. It includes regular planning at centre and classroom level; opportunities for staff to engage in continuous professional and career development; time allowed for child observation, assessments and documentation; support of staff performance in the form of accompaniment and mentoring […]

Child-outcome quality or performance standards
ECEC services are founded not only to facilitate the labour market or other aims but above all to improve the present and future well-being of children. Positive child outcomes are a major goal of ECEC programmes in all countries. Differences between countries arise about the outcomes to be privileged. […]

Standards pertaining to parent/community outreach and involvement
This area is mentioned less than other quality standards in national regulations and curricula, but can emerge strongly in the requirements for targeted and local ECEC programmes. […]

(OECD, 2006, p. 127-129)

The CoRe research team builds on these elements of quality to establish a working definition of quality in this report. We argue, however, that the acknowledgement of the importance of the *actors* (practitioners, children, families etc.) and their interactions, for establishing *quality* on a day to day basis, requires an explicit emphasis on the relational and processual aspects of *quality*. This is in line with the explicit *systemic* perspective we take on our topic throughout this report. The working definition we suggest for the purpose considers *quality* to be a *multi-dimensional* and generic construct. It unfolds – and has to be proactively developed – in at least five dimensions:

- *experiences of and outcomes for children* (e.g. experiences of belonging, involvement, well-being, meaning-making, achievement)

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

A systemic, dynamic and processual definition of quality, and an emphasis on dialogue and negotiation, does not open the way to unconditional relativism ('anything goes') nor does it lose sight of 'outcomes'. On the contrary, we insist that outcomes (for children, families, communities and the broader society) are crucial; they will be found within each of the dimensions outlined above. They need to be systematically evaluated and documented, but cannot be predetermined without negotiation with all stakeholders.

In research literature on the relationships between quality and qualifications, quality is predominantly rated through instruments such as ECERS, the Caregiver Interaction Scale, ITERS, the Observational Record of Caregiving Environment, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, the Family Day Care Rating Scale and HOME. Although these scales are generally seen as meeting scientific requirements regarding validity and reliability, they have also been criticised for narrowing down the concept of quality to environmental aspects, to learning in a narrow sense, or for neglecting more social and relational aspects of ECEC as well as the meaning-making of children and parents themselves (e.g. Dahlberg et al., 1999, 2007). Assuming that the concept of quality in ECEC embeds by definition 'values, implicit ideologies, subjective perceptions and social constructions reflecting different cultures […] experiences, academic traditions, social needs and expectations' (Bondioli & Ghedini, 2000), quality in this field needs to be conceptualised as a result of a process of constant negotiation between all actors involved in ECEC institutions (European Commission Childcare Network, 1991; Dahlberg et al., 1999, 2007). Universal, decontextualised approaches to defining *quality* tend to result in technocratic and managerial procedures that are not appropriate for the complexity of early childhood professional practice. 'While we need to remain critical about *quality* and its implications for practice, in a broader policy context, arguing for *better quality* can be an effective driving force' (Urban, 2008, p. 138).

In this document, we use the concept of *quality* in relation to professionalism. We emphasise that it is concerned with the *economic, social* and *educational* functions of ECEC, and that it unfolds at all four levels of a *competent ECEC system* (see p. 25).

6.4 Professionals and practitioners

As the SEEPRO project (Oberhuemer et al., 2010) made perfectly clear, there are many different professionals working in the field of early childhood education and care, bearing different names according to the country and the type of services they work in, the qualifications they have, or the functions they fulfil. Their names may vary from teachers, teaching assistants to educators or family day care providers with many different variations, even within one country (cf. Adams, 2005). When we talk about them in generic terms, we use the general term *practitioner* to include all men and women working in ECEC settings that provide non-parental education for children under compulsory school age. These services include childcare centres, nurseries, nursery schools, kindergartens, various types of age-integrated centres and family day care provided by home-based workers. When we talk about a specific category of practitioners, we refer as much as possible to their names in the original language of the country we are speaking about, since it cannot be assumed for instance that an *éducateur* in French would have the same meaning as in English.

6.5 Practitioner education

In this report we use the expression *practitioner education* to refer broadly to any form of professional preparation and continuous learning that enhances the competence of early childhood practitioners. Behind this terminological choice stand our intention to emphasise the wide reaching aims of professionalisation processes as identified by the research community (Oberhuemer, 2005). The expression *practitioner education* in fact point to a broad conceptualisation of learning which encompass reflection on professional practices, co-construction of shared knowledge and negotiation of meanings and purposes between human beings (Urban, 2008). Ultimately, our definition of *practitioner education* underpins a transformative connotation of professional practices, which are understood as constantly co-constructed, de-constructed and reconstructed in the relationships with children, families and local communities.

Therefore in this report, the expression *practitioner education* is used as a generic term that may comprise many different aspects, including *initial professional preparation* (qualifying or not qualifying professionalising routes undertaken before one is involved in practice) and *continuing professional development* on the job (in-service courses, team supervision, tutoring, pedagogical guidance, counselling…).

7 CoRe research findings

7.1 High levels of systemic competences are required

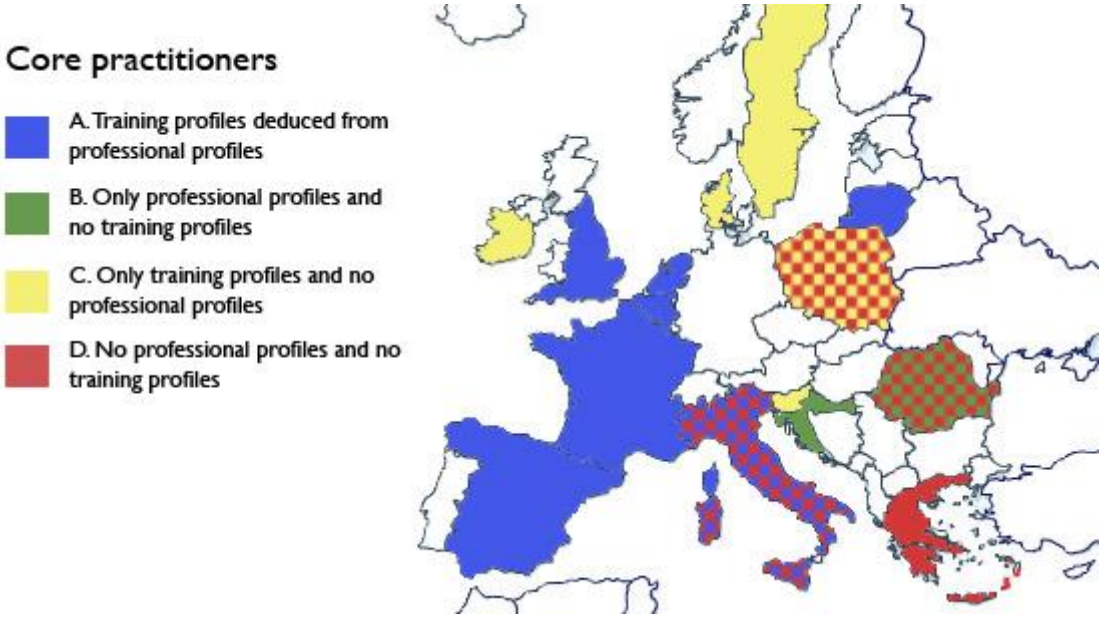
- Both in academia and in international policy documents there is a broad consensus that high-quality early childhood education has long-lasting beneficial effects on children and society, but that ECEC of low or mediocre quality may also harm children. There is a similar consensus that the **competences of the workforce are one of the more salient predictors of ECEC quality**. Research therefore recommends that ECEC professionals should be trained at Bachelor level (ISCED 5) and international policy documents state that at least 60% of the workforce should be trained at this level.

- Different pathways to professionalisation are possible. There is substantial evidence, both from literature and from case studies, that a **coherent and diversified policy** aimed at **continuous professional development at institutional or team level, developed by specialised staff (pedagogical co-ordinators,** *pedagogistas*, **counsellors) can yield beneficial effects** to equal those of **initial professional preparation** . Yet short-term in-service courses (e.g. limited to a few days per year) that is not embedded in a coherent policy does not suffice to raise the competences of the professionals with low or no qualifications.

- The quality of the workforce cannot be reduced to the sum of the individuals' competences. Although the term 'competence' may often be associated with qualities of an individual, in fact the **quality of the workforce is determined by the interaction between competent individuals in what we refer to as a 'competent system'**. Among the more salient aspects of systemic conditions that allow for competence systems to flourish are good working conditions that reduce turnover of staff and **continuous pedagogical support, aiming at documenting practice, critically reflecting upon it, and co-constructing pedagogy as an alternation between theory and practice**. This requires time, team collaboration and continuous pedagogical support.

7.2 Formal competence requirements in European countries

- The survey shows that whereas some countries have national formal competence requirements both for the profession and for the initial professional preparation , other countries have formal competence requirements for the profession but not for professional preparation (or vice versa) and still others have none at all. The existence of formal **competence requirements at national level has the advantage of creating consistency** between training institutions and employers, or between professional preparation and national ECEC curricula (especially when they are co-constructed by the different stakeholders).



Source: CoRe 2011

- Although national competence profiles are beneficial in general, there is a risk that excessively narrow, detailed and prescriptive profiles may also stifle the local dynamics that are essential for developing quality. Where **competence profiles** consider **broader areas** instead, including a body of knowledge, generic skills as well as reflective and reflexive competences, local ECEC settings and training institutions start from these broad areas but have freedom to develop and discuss the competences with students or professionals in their specific social context. When teams of professionals **actively collaborate** on competence profiles and competence development, professionals tend to be **more internally motivated to develop and improve the quality** of ECEC than when professionals are obliged to follow prescriptive, top-down competence profiles (Hjort, 2009).

- Regarding practitioners initial professional preparation , the survey experts in different countries seem to agree that profiles should **be framed in general terms**, rather than in detailed lists or descriptions, and that they should contain knowledge and skills as well as reflective competences.

- Preferably, competence profiles should be co-constructions, involving practitioners, experts and policymakers. When the participation procedures are both very formal and comprehensive, however, the result may be that they are too **time-consuming, leading to a lack of flexibility.**

- There is a tension between instrumental labour market demands of early childhood professionals and the furthering of experimentation, innovation and knowledge development in educational institutions required to develop the profession (e.g. universities). Simply deciding what is good enough for the 'market' is unlikely to result in a developing and innovative profession fit for today's and tomorrow's children and families**. A right balance** has to be struck between the **demands of the labour market** and the role of **training institutes as places of research, critical reflection and innovation** in society. This demands an interactive and co-constructive approach by training institutions and workplaces.

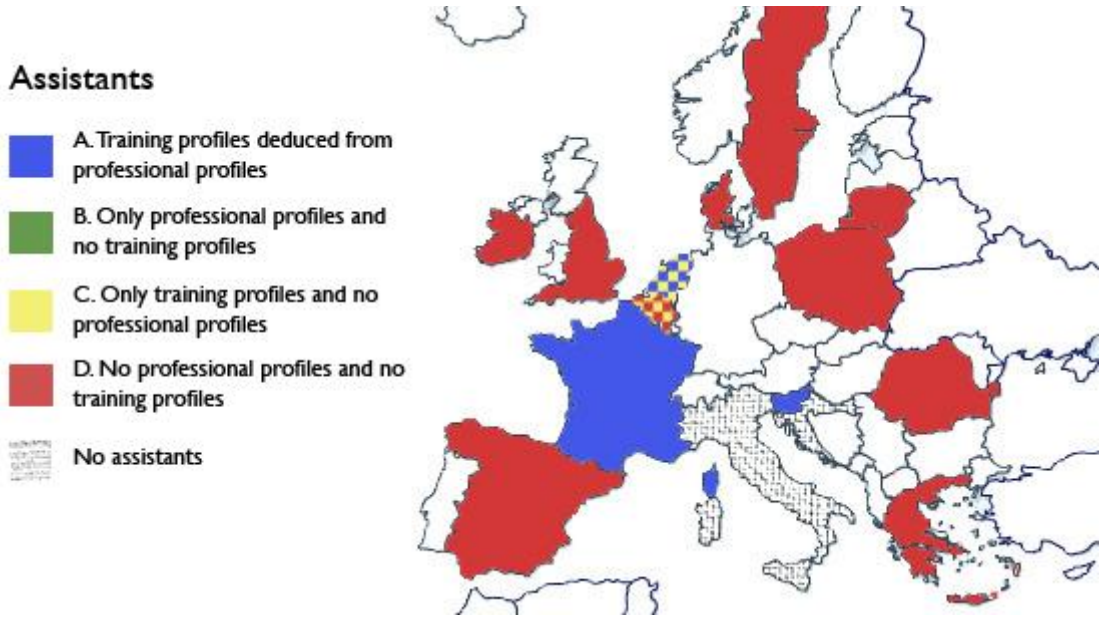
- Findings from the case studies point to the importance of building reciprocal relationships with parents in a context of diversity. The survey shows, however, that many formal professional competence profiles and training profiles mainly focus on knowledge and competences about working with children, therefore neglecting the essential work with parents and local communities.

- The survey shows that most **formal competence profiles are oriented towards the individual professional**. Although some competence profiles also address issues of how the ECEC educator can function in the system, in the end it is still the responsibility of the individual professional to function in this system. According to local experts, the literature review and the case studies, legal regulations regarding these individual competence profiles cannot suffice to enhance the quality of institutions. Other investments are necessary to accompany the implementation of competence profiles. They include **support for practitioners and future practitioners, stimulating policymaking capacity of ECEC settings and leadership, personnel, time for shared reflection, coaching, career counselling and other support structures.** They also include support for training institutions to develop their own interpretations of the profiles, and to support the teachers of the future practitioners.

7.3 Inclusive professionalisation for a diverse workforce

- There is no such thing as the European early childhood workforce. There are considerable variations both within and across countries and regions, related to diverse historical backgrounds and quite different forms of organising ECEC (e.g. split versus unitary systems). Our survey confirmed the variety that was explored in the SEEPRO study, but, in addition, also focused on an important part of the workforce that often remains **invisible in international reports: the auxiliary staff or assistants.** In this report we define 'Assistants' as staff that support the higher-qualified core practitioner in working directly with the children and their families in ECEC services.

- The proportion of assistant staff varies from a very small percentage to half of the workforce in EU countries. Assistants often have to meet significantly fewer formal competence requirements than do core practitioners. In most countries **formal requirements for professional preparation of assistants do not exist.**



Source: CoRe 2011

- Their role in contributing to high-quality ECEC services deserves more attention, as quite often assistants are a **first and important point of contact for children and families**.
- Usually, assistants have very limited access to qualifying professional development programs, and fewer opportunities to participate in team meetings, collaborative planning and pedagogical documentation than do core practitioners.
- Assistants are often responsible for tasks that are considered to be ***practical* caring tasks**, as opposed to education – an understanding which, in turn, **narrows down the notion of education to formalised *learning*** and may jeopardise a holistic approach to pedagogy.
- It is a challenge for many countries to **value the assistant's role without devaluing the professional status and the importance of qualifications**. The survey reveals that options for meeting this challenge may include **shared professional development and team meetings** to build up a shared culture and language, as well as investing in **pathways that enable assistants to obtain some form of qualification** at their own pace.
- From this perspective, critical factors for success in increasing the competences of assistants in ECEC services are:
    - Continuing professional development policies that include assistants
    - Democratic decision-making structures

- Time for shared reflection for core practitioners and assistants starting from the same mission and/or curriculum
- Opportunities for assistants to participate in qualifying professional development programs
- Close co-operation between assistants, qualified core workers, trainers and heads of ECEC institutions
- Focus on practice-based learning approaches and special professionalising opportunities dedicated to assistants from minority, marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds.

Some practitioners with a low initial preparation have increased their competences throughout their career and succeeded in reaching high levels of professionalism. These important efforts should lead to formal qualifications through the recognition of previously acquired competences. This can be realised through existing systems such as the Vocational Qualification System, but also by **giving credits for being actively involved in practice-based research** and/or by **following pedagogical guidance and professional development initiatives over extended periods of time**. The use of portfolios may contribute to this accreditation.

7.4 Case studies as examples of systemic approaches to professionalisation

The seven case studies describe inspiring examples of how systemic professionalisation can be achieved through different pathways.

- The cases of Pistoia (Italy) and Ghent (Flemish community of Belgium) show how professional development initiatives in combination with pedagogical counselling can lead to high levels of reflective professionalism, and equip teams to work in complex contexts of diversity. This asks for **continuous pedagogical support** in order to support staff to document their practice and reflect upon it. A general curriculum or a set of **guiding principles** is an important supportive element for this reflection. In these cases, and in the Pistoia case in particular as well as in Slovenia, the focus on **collegiality and solidarity**, not only within the team, but also across teams, enables assistants to take part in this systemic professionalisation process, and to develop a common culture of reflection.
- The case of ESSSE (Lyon, France) shows how unqualified practitioners can gain access to tertiary qualifying education while remaining part-time professionals. Through **analysing their practice** in the training institutes, they gain **deep reflective competencies** as well as knowledge and skills on a tertiary level.
- The case of the Vocational Qualification System in England shows how a comprehensive national system can be rolled out in order to **recognise previously acquired competences**. The case also shows, however, the pitfalls of a detailed and prescriptive national model. The **risk** may be that the workforce is reduced to a static rather than a dynamic professionalism, and that the competences that are valued are **limited to what is deemed measurable**, to the detriment of the systemic and reflexive aspects.

- The case of Danish pedagogue education shows a very interesting example of what a generic initial tertiary education can look like. The professional preparation of future educators is carried out within a social pedagogical tradition that focuses on broad competences rather than on a list of skills. The *pedagog* education is based on a holistic approach to children and adults as well as on the **personal development of future educators**.

- The case of the WTANP programme in Poland shows how professionalism can take shape in the context of extreme shortages of provision, as well as shortages of qualified workforce, in collaboration with parents and representatives of local communities. It offers interesting insights into the process of systemic professionalisation of ECEC workforces outside the public sector. Within a comprehensive approach to ECEC, the Comenius Foundation has developed a **framework for teachers' professional development** that is tailored to the needs of local rural communities.

- The Slovenian case study has been chosen to analyse the relationships between different professional roles with diverse responsibilities across a variety of pre-school institutions and in the first year of primary school. Various professionals and semi-professionals – with different levels of formal education – are included in these processes: pre-school teachers, pre-school teachers' assistants, primary school teachers and Roma teaching assistants. The case shows how **educational responsibilities are distributed and negotiated among different professional roles within different settings**.

- Overall the results of the case studies show the need to **re-invent** professional development for the practitioners. Successful initiatives for practitioners education are **part of a coherent system of continuous professional development that is focused on transformative practice**. These successful initiatives are characterised by a focus on **experience-specific professional development** (practitioner research or *analyse de pratique*); it is an investment in intergenerational transmission of competences, mutual cooperation and peer learning approaches.

7.5 Competent systems

Although there is broad consensus on the need for professionalisation, there is much less literature or consensus on the profile or the content of this profession. Researchers looking at the relationships between professionalism and quality of provision seldom critically discuss their conceptualisations of quality, and restrict their analysis to looking at levels of professionalism performed by individuals, often without analysing the content of practitioners education programs. In this predominantly English-language literature, the focus of ECEC is on a rather narrow conceptualisation of 'education', somewhat ignoring the importance of care typical of more holistic and systemic approaches (e.g. the German concept of *Bildung,* the Danish concept of *social pedagogy* and the Italian concept of *collegialità*).

We have framed our approach to understanding competence with a holistic understanding of early childhood education and care – as *education in the broadest sense* (cf. section 5.2, ECEC). Such an understanding inevitably leads to a broad and holistic understanding of competence and competence requirements for working in this field.

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

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

Brought together in a coherent framework, *competence* in each of these four layers characterises what we would like to call a *competent system*. This is a systemic conceptualisation that extends the traditional understanding of competence (as an individual property) into the institutional and governance domain, a view that is supported by literature (Timar & Kirp, 1991) and by the OECD DeSeCo project (OECD, 2005). In this perspective our understanding of competence moves beyond thought knowledge and trained skills to fully embrace reflectiveness as its core. **By assuming reflectivity at the core of our conceptualisation we acknowledge that a demand-led competence approach** (*what do practitioners need in order to provide high-quality educational experiences to young children?*) **cannot be irrespective of the fact that individuals themselves – children, parents practitioners and all stakeholders involved in ECEC systems – help to shape the nature of such demand** (*what do high-quality educational experiences mean to children, parents, practitioners and local communities across different countries and different cultures?*). As well as relating to the demands of contemporary society professional competence in ECEC is determined by the nature of our goals as individuals and as a society. For this reason **our conceptualisation broadens the traditional understanding of competence** – defined in terms of *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes* – in order to embrace the aspects of complexity that characterise educational work. In the framework designed by the CoRe study, competence unfolds in the dimensions of **knowledge, practices and values** that are relevant to all layers of the system mentioned above. By referring to **practices** instead of skills we intend to distance ourselves from a technical conceptualisation of educational work (*do I do things right?*) to move toward its **intrinsically reflective nature** (*do I do the right things?*) (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, & Bradt, 2010). Similarly, by referring to **values** instead of attitudes we intend to distance ourselves from an 'individualised' conceptualisation of ECEC purposes to move toward a vision of early childhood education that underpins **negotiated goals and collective aspirations**. Within this framework competences are intentionally rather than explicitly listed: the interplay of knowledge, practices and values in fact can generate different approaches according to different countries and cultural contexts. In this framework the fundamental values expressed by recent European documents constitute the common ground on which the collective aspirations of local community can flourish. In the same way a solid base of knowledge, building upon academic research, is presented as a starting-point for developing local practice-based research. Finally, competent practices are illustrated with the intention of encouraging local experimentalism. The points we address in this framework are not meant to be exhaustive but rather need to be considered as inspiring suggestions.

According to our framework, **the *competent early childhood system* unfolds in the dimensions of *knowledge*, *practice* and *values*. These dimensions are relevant to all of the layers of the system mentioned above: individual, institutional, inter-institutional and governance.** The dimensions of

knowledge, practices and values underpinning competence at each level of system will be elaborated in detail in the following sections.

7.5.1 Individual competences

At the very core of professional competence lies the constant ability to connect the dimensions of *knowledge*, *practice* and *values* through critical reflection. In the table below we spell out some aspects of those dimensions but it needs to be emphasized that, in real life, they are inseparable. *Knowing, doing* and *being* all come together in professional ECEC practice. Considering that ECEC staff will increasingly be working in complex and changing contexts of diversity, dealing with unpredictability and reconstructing daily practices become crucial aspects of professional competence. Therefore, becoming a competent practitioner is the result of a continuous learning process: a process through which one's own practices and beliefs are constantly questioned in relation to changing contexts.

Knowledge	Practices	Values
• Knowledge of various **developmental aspects of children from a holistic perspective** (cognitive, social, emotional, creative…)	• Building strong pedagogical relationships with children, based on sensitive responsivity • Observing children in order to identify their developmental needs • Planning and implementing a wide range of educational projects that respond to children's needs supporting their holistic development • Documenting children's progress systematically in order to constantly redefine educational practices • Identifying children with special educational needs and elaborating strategies for their inclusion	• Taking into account children's needs in order to promote their full potential and their participation in the life of ECEC institutions[1] • Adopting a holistic vision of education that encompasses learning, care and upbringing[2] • Committing to inclusive educational approaches[3]
• Knowledge of children's different **strategies of learning** (play-based, social learning, early literacy and numeracy, language acquisition and multilingualism)	• Creating and organising effective learning environments • Arranging small-group project work starting from children's interests (inquiry-based learning) • Encouraging children's personal initiatives	• Adopting a child-centred approach that views children as competent, active agents and as protagonists of their own learning[4] • Understanding learning as a co-constructed and open-

[1] *Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Communication from the Commission 'An EU agenda for the rights of the child ', 2011a; UNCRC, 1989.*
[2] *Caring and learning together* (UNESCO, 2010)
[3] *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006) that has been signed by all Member States and ratified by most.
[4] *Working for Inclusion (CiS, 2011)*; *Conclusions on preparing young people for the 21st century, 2008*

	• Supporting children's symbolic play through appropriate provision of structured and unstructured materials • Generating an appropriate curriculum that stimulates emergent literacy, maths and science skills • Promoting language acquisition from a multilingual perspective (recognising children's home language and supporting second language acquisition) • Offering more personalised and individual learning support to children with special educational needs	ended process that ensures children's successful social engagement and encourages further learning[5] • Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to learning[6] • Adopting a multilingual approach that encourages learning in contexts of diversity[7]
• Knowledge of **communication with children and participation**	• Valuing and encouraging children's expression through different languages (painting, dancing, story-telling…) • Making accessible to children the cultural heritage of local communities as well as the cultural heritage of humankind (arts, drama, music, dance, sports…) • Encouraging children to engage in cultural production as a way to express themselves • Involving children in community-based projects (festivals, cultural events,…) and valuing their contributions (through exhibitions, documentaries…) • Co-constructing pedagogical knowledge together with children	• Adopting a rights-based approach to ECEC in which children's right to citizenship encompasses their full participation in the social and cultural life of their community[8] • Promoting democracy, solidarity, active citizenship, creativity and personal fulfilment[9]
• Knowledge of **working with parents and local communities**	• Analysing the needs of local communities to work effectively with parents and disadvantaged groups	• Adopting a democratic and inclusive approach to the

[5] *Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications, 2005; Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b; Improving competences for the 21st century, 2008b*

[6] *Council Conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Conclusions on preparing young people for the 21st century, 2008; Key competences for Lifelong Learning, 2007c.*

[7] *Council Conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background*, 2009b.

[8] *UNCRC, 1989 - art. 31*, *Charter of fundamental Rights of the European Union*, 2010 – art. 24.

[9] *Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010a; Conclusions on preparing young people for the 21st century, 2008; Communication on improving competences for the 21st century,* 2008b; *Council conclusions on strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, 2009a*.

(knowledge about families, poverty and diversity)[10]	• Establishing relationships with parents based on mutual understanding, trust and cooperation • Enabling open communication and reciprocal dialogue with parents • Creating systematic opportunities fostering dialogue and exchanges (e.g. documentation, but also welcoming practices…) • Involving parents in the decision-making processes (collegial bodies, parents-teachers committees,…) and taking their perspectives into account • Co-constructing pedagogical knowledge together with parents and supporting their parental role • Organising initiatives involving parents as well as members of local communities (e.g. workshops, debates and open conferences,…) • Building up support for ECEC services within local communities • Establishing collaborative relationships with other professionals (e.g. health and social services)	education of young children and families in order to sustain social cohesion[11] • Recognising the educational responsibility of parents as main educators of their children during the early years[12]
• Knowledge of **team working** (interpersonal communication and group-work dynamics) [13]	• Continuously reviewing practices individually and collectively • Sharing and exchanging expertise with colleagues in	• Adopting a democratic and critically reflective approach to the education of young children[14]

[10] Findings from the case studies point to the importance of building reciprocal relationships with parents in a context of diversity. The survey shows, however, that many formal professional competence profiles and training profiles mainly focus on knowledge and competences about working with children, therefore neglecting the essential work with parents and local communities. In order to address the complex situations of children and families in contexts of social change, it is desirable to integrate practitioners' competences within a coherent framework that embraces all aspects of care, learning and participation.

[11] *Council conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010a; Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background, 2009b; Council conclusions on strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, 2009a; Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b.*

[12] *Council conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b*

[13] Whereas findings from the case studies emphasise the importance of collegiality and teamwork, the survey shows that many formal professional competence profiles and training profiles focus solely on knowledge and competences about individual practice with children.

[14] *Communication on ECEC, 2011; CiS Working for Inclusion, 2011; Council conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, 2009c*; *Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b.*

	team meetings • Engaging in discussion and learning from disagreement • Developing educational practices together with colleagues through joint work • Co-constructing pedagogical knowledge through documentation and collective evaluation of educational practices	
• Knowledge of **working in contexts of diversity** (anti-biased approaches, intercultural dialogue, identity…)	• Developing inclusive practices that facilitate the socialisation of children and families within a plurality of value systems and proactively address discrimination • Facilitating intercultural dialogue within ECEC services and in the wider community through parents' involvement • Dealing with unpredictability and uncertainty • Elaborating a pedagogical framework that sustains inclusive practices within ECEC services	• Adopting a democratic and inclusive approach that values diversity[15]
• Knowledge of the situation of **ECEC in the broader local, national and international context**	• Actively engaging with local communities in promoting children's and families' rights and participation • Networking with other professionals (e.g. professional associations, trade unions) and engaging in local political consultation	• Rights-based approach to ECEC that promotes children's and families' active citizenship, solidarity and lifelong learning[16]
• **Health and care** of young children and basic knowledge of **social protection**	• Implementing appropriate practices in relation to children's safety, hygiene and nutrition	• Commitment to child welfare and well-being[17]

Table: Individual competences

[15] *Council Conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010a; Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background, 2009b; Conclusions on preparing young people for the 21st century, 2008; Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b; Council conclusions on strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, 2009a.*

[16] *ET 2020, 2010a; UNCRC, 1989; Charter of fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2010 – art. 24.*

[17] *UNCRC, 1989; Charter of fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2010 – art. 24.*

7.5.2 Institutional competences

Developing practitioners' competences is also a responsibility of professional teams. Competences in fact evolve constantly from individuals to the group and vice versa, qualifying institutions as a whole. The case studies have shown that alternations between theory and practice are crucial for developing these competences in actual or future early childhood practitioners. Moreover, the case studies have opened windows into interesting practices that show how this could be realised by illustrating diverse possible pathways for the education and professional development of reflective practitioners. In the table below the elements of competent ECEC and training institutions are explored in further detail.

Knowledge	Practices	Values
ECEC institutions • Pedagogical knowledge with a focus on **early childhood** and **diversity** • Knowledge of **situated learning** and **community of practices** (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)	• Elaborating a shared pedagogical framework orienting practitioners' educational work (e.g. ISSA, DECET, 'professional profile of the centre') • Arrange paid time for all staff to plan, document and review educational work collectively • Adopting systematic procedures for documenting educational practices and for evaluating the outcomes of pedagogical choices on children's and families' experiences • Providing opportunities for joint work (inter-vision and supervision) • Offering ongoing pedagogical guidance to all staff • Elaborating an organised framework for continuous	• Democracy and respect for diversity[18] • Understanding of professional development as a continuous learning process that encompasses personal and professional growth[19] • Conceiving professional learning as a recursive interaction of practising and theorising that needs to be supported coherently across the different stages of a professional career[20] • Conceiving ECEC institutions as critically reflective communities that reciprocally interact with the

[18] *Council Conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010a; Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background, 2009b; Conclusions on preparing young people for the 21st century, 2008; Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b; Council conclusions on strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, 2009a.*

19 *Council conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, 2009c; Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications, 2005; Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b.*

20 *Joint progress report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme, 2010b*; *Council Conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, 2009c; Communication 'Improving competences for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools ', 2008b.*

• Knowledge of **learning organisations** and **reflective approaches** (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983, 1987; Argyris, 1992) • Knowledge of **school leadership** (collaborative management styles and distributed leadership)	professional development of practitioners, assistants and centre leaders (induction, in-service professionalising initiatives...) • Providing continuing professional development programmes strongly rooted in practices and tailored to the needs of practitioners working in local communities • Offering diversified opportunities for continuing professional development (centre-based initiatives, action-research projects, competence portfolio, inter-generational learning initiatives, networking and mobility exchanges) • Providing incentives for taking part in continuing professional development activities (credits for career mobility) • Offering the possibility to combine work with attendance at training institutes/university courses • Providing opportunities for horizontal career mobility through the diversification of roles and responsibilities • Providing opportunities for vertical career mobility of low-qualified staff • Organising regular meetings with colleagues, parents and local communities (open conferences, joint projects,...) • Providing additional pedagogical support to practitioners working in disadvantaged areas (specific continuing professional development programmes, counselling…) • Recruiting a diverse workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities in which ECEC institutions are	changing needs of children, parents and the wider society[21] • Conceiving ECEC institutions as a forum for civil engagement that fosters social cohesion[22]

[21] *Council conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, 2009c.*

[22] *Joint progress report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme, 2010b*; *Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010a; Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background, 2009b; Council conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, 2009c; Communication 'Improving competences for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools ', 2008b.*

	operating	
Training institutes • Pedagogical knowledge with a focus on **early childhood** and **diversity** • Knowledge of **adult learning** and **reflective approaches** (Schön, 1987) • Knowledge of **situated learning** and **communities of practices** (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)	• Providing programmes that are based on a well-balanced combination of theory (academic research) and practice (practical experiences in ECEC settings) • Providing programmes aimed at developing cultural awareness and expression (e.g. activity & culture subjects) • Offering differentiated learning devices: lectures, small-group workshops, project work, work placement... • Providing individualised support through tutoring activities, both in the training centre and on work placement • Providing opportunities for sharing reflections on practical experiences within peer groups • Providing inclusive and flexible professionalising roots that widen access to non-traditional learners and disadvantaged groups • Elaborating strategies for the validation of non-formal and informal learning • Encouraging mobility opportunities • Offering specialised opportunities in inter-cultural education (lectures, small-group workshops, fieldwork,…)	• Conceiving professionalisation as a process that encompasses social and cultural promotion to enhance LLL and social inclusion[23] • Understanding professionalisation as a continuous learning process that encompasses personal and professional growth[24] • Understanding professionalisation as a learning process that takes place in interaction • Conceiving professional learning as a recursive interaction of practicing and theorising that needs to be supported coherently across the different stages of professional career[25]

Table: Institutional competences

[23] *Joint progress report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme, 2010b.*
[24] *Joint progress report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme, 2010b.*
[25] *Joint progress report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme, 2010b; Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010a; Council Conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, 2009c; Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background, 2009b; Communication 'Improving competences for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools ', 2008b.*

7.5.3 Inter-institutional and inter-agency competences

A systemic approach to professionalisation needs to look beyond the walls of the individual institution. This implies putting in place structural measures to foster close collaborations with other provisions that may take different forms, according to the local context and the needs of children and families. The CoRe case studies provided interesting insights into how this could be realised within the framework of inter-agency cooperation. The table below outlines how a competent relationships among institutions could be developed in order to promote the welfare of children through inter-agency cooperation.

Knowledge	Practices	Values
• Knowledge of **inter-agency cooperation** • Knowledge of **community development**	• Promoting networking between ECEC institutions of the same district • Structuring cross-sectoral approaches to care and education services (health care, child protection, social services) • Outreaching towards families living in difficult conditions	• Democracy and respect for diversity[26] • Assuming a partnership approach to the education and care of young children in order to foster social cohesion[27]

[26] *Council Conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010a; Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background, 2009b; Conclusions on preparing young people for the 21st century, 2008b; Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b; Council conclusions on strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, 2009a.*

[27] *Council Conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications, 2005.*

• **Cross-disciplinary knowledge** (health & care, pedagogical and sociological)	• Outreaching towards families with special needs children • Fostering close collaboration between ECEC institutions and primary schools to ensure smooth transition through organised forms of inter-professional collaboration • Strengthening partnership between ECEC and training institutes • Promoting cooperation between ECEC institutions and local authorities in charge of educational policy-making through systematic political consultation • Promoting international cooperation through mobility exchanges and transnational projects	• Conceiving of care and education as integrated in order to meet all children's needs in a holistic way[28] • Adopting inclusive educational approaches[29] Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to professional development through partnership[30]

Table: Inter-institutional and inter-agency competences

[28] *Council Conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; Communication from the Commission 'An EU agenda for the rights of the child ', 2011a.*

[29] *Council Conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication on ECEC, 2011b; UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities, 2006.*

[30] *Joint progress report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme, 2010b, Council conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, 2009c.*

7.5.4 Competences of governance

Finally, a competent system also includes aspects of general governance. The aspects characterising competent governance of ECEC systems are outlined in the table and further discussed in the paragraphs below.

Knowledge	Practices	Values[31]
• Knowledge of the situation of **ECEC in local, regional, national and international contexts** • Knowledge of **children's and families' rights** • Knowledge of **diversity in all its forms** and **anti-discriminatory practices** • Knowledge of **comprehensive strategies for tackling poverty** and socio-cultural inequalities	• Adequately resourcing ECEC in order to provide generalised equitable access to high-quality ECEC in particular for children with a socioeconomically disadvantaged background or with special educational needs • Designing efficient funding models in the framework of coherent educational public policies • Adopting an integrated approach to ECEC services at local, regional and national level • Co-constructing with all stakeholders a coherent pedagogical framework that ensures coordination between: - ECEC curriculum - Qualification framework for professional preparation of ECEC staff - Quality, monitoring and evaluation framework - Governance framework addressing administrative responsibilities(at local, regional and national level) • Ensuring cross-sectoral collaboration between different	• Children's right to active participation in society • Children's right to develop their full potential through education and successful learning • Respect and inclusion of diversity • Education as a public good • Democracy, social inclusion and economic development

[31] *Council conclusions on ECEC, 2011; Communication from the Commission 'An EU agenda for the rights of the child ', 2011a; Joint progress report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme, 2010b; Council conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010a; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, 2010; ET 2020, 2010; *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities* (Eurydice, 2009); *Council conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, 2009c; Council conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background, 2009b; Conclusions on preparing young people for the 21st century, 2008*; *Council conclusions on strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, 2009a; Improving the quality of teacher education, 2007b; UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities, 2006; UNCRC, 1989.*

	policy sectors (education, culture, social affairs, employment, health and justice) • Supporting professionalisation of ECEC staff through: - policies that address coherently initial preparation, induction and continuous professional development of all staff (practitioners, assistants, centre leaders) - investments in various forms of pedagogical guidance - policies promoting career mobility of low-qualified staff through flexible qualification pathways - enhancing the prestige of the profession by ensuring favourable working conditions • Promoting policies to address the gender gap

Table: Competences of governance

1. *ECEC as a public good*

The successful examples provided by the CoRe case studies are all embedded in a coherent public policy. **Competent systems** flourish under ECEC governance that is built on consultation with key stakeholders, particularly at local level. Attempts to regulate the sector or the 'market' (in marketised ECEC systems) tend to result in discontinuity between professionalising initiatives at different levels of the system, and consequently fail to qualify the entire ECEC system (English case study).

The literature review shows that high levels of systemic professionalism are more difficult to achieve when ECEC is predominantly private and market-oriented. In these cases employers tend to restrict investments in salaries as well as time for professional development and supervision and therefore affect the reflective competences of the system (e.g. Moss, 2008).

2. *Curricula and competence profiles*

The OECD (2006) recommends that curricula or pedagogical frameworks are developed at regional or national level, framing the values of ECEC in society, albeit not in narrow prescriptive terms, and co-constructed with different stakeholders in participative ways. Our survey supports this approach. The existence of general pedagogical frameworks can foster the coherence of training curricula, the relation between initial professional preparation and employment, intergenerational transmission among colleagues, and strengthening the integration of work experience and formal education .

A coherent policy framework needs to address all components of the **competent system**. National policies should ensure the following aspects are in place and interrelated:

- A *curriculum framework*, addressing overall goals, principles and competences for working with young children from birth to at least compulsory school age, regardless of the institutional setting.
- A *qualification framework* addressing professional preparation and professional development for all members of the ECEC workforce, including assistant and support staff.
- A *quality framework* addressing criteria for the level of quality required from all early childhood services, and ways to develop good practices.
- A *monitoring and evaluation framework* ensuring data on the ECEC sector are collected systematically and evaluations involving all key stakeholders are conducted regularly.
- A *framework for governance* addressing policy responsibilities at different levels of government (e.g. municipal, regional, national) and linking early childhood policies to a wider policy context (e.g. education, welfare, citizenship, equality).

It must be noted, however, that detailed (prescriptive) curricula also carry the risk of narrowing down the discretionary space of training institutions as well as of practitioners, and may jeopardise experimentation and innovative possibilities.

3. *Employment conditions*

Precarious work conditions, which are the reality for early childhood practitioners in many countries, and in particular for those working with the youngest and most vulnerable children, impede individual learning and, in consequence, professionalisation of the entire field. Policies to increase professionalisation focusing only on initial professional preparation, without addressing employment and work conditions, have proven to be ineffective. Individual and team competences flourish when supported by local and/or national policies. This includes a combination of regulations on work conditions and on professionalism. Working conditions for individual practitioners are a key factor in developing a **competent system** (Early, Maxwell, & Burchinal, 2007). Regarding work regulations, policies that guarantee decent wages (e.g. pay parity with primary school teachers) reduce staff turnover and enhance professional and social status. Equally important is the right to time without children ('non-contact time'), in order to meet with colleagues within the institution and with colleagues of other services.

4. *Towards unitary systems*

The constant need to coordinate policies between different government departments with fragmented responsibilities for aspects of the ECEC system ties down scarce resources and has proven to be ineffective. The integration of services for all young children either in the education or welfare system in a unitary system tends to result in more coherent policies, increased professionalism, higher qualification requirements and better wages (OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 2010).

The findings of our study also suggest that the content of ECEC is deepened in cases where professionals are generic, rather than specialised in one field of work or one specific age group. In the Danish case, the preparation of the *paedagog* entails a focus on broad competences, enabling them to work in welfare organisations for all ages. In the case of ESSSE, the future *éducateurs jeunes enfants* work in several socio-pedagogical settings for young children and their parents. This is an inspiring approach to incorporating competences for working with parents into the curriculum.

5. *Investment in pedagogical advice/support*

Investments in continuous pedagogical support have the potential of strong impact on the quality of ECEC services, as they lead to continuous professional development of the workforce. There is substantial evidence that investment in initial professional preparation is cost-effective if complemented by a coherent policy on professional development, supported by specifically qualified staff (e.g. *pedagogistas*, *pedagogical coordinators* or *advisers*).

Continuous professional development, accompanied by specially qualified staff needs to take place over extended periods of time and needs to be focused on transforming collective and individual practices.

Coherent support and professional development policies can effectively increase competence at team level and result in high levels of professionalism even in teams with low-qualified practitioners.

6. *Addressing the gender gap*

The Care Work in Europe project (Cameron & Moss, 2007) has shown that it is imperative to overcome the notion that care work is 'what women naturally do', and actively to address the gender gap in the ECEC workforce. The SEEPRO project shows that this is still very far from the reality, given the extremely low percentage of men in ECEC. Experts agree that the number of men working in ECEC must rise to 10% (European Childcare Network, 1996; Care Work in Europe, 2007; Children in Europe, 2008; Seepro, 2010).

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

8 Policy recommendations

8.1 Recommendations following from previous research

8.1.1 Recurrent preconditions

Investments in staff competences may yield beneficial effects, but need to be accompanied by other preconditions. These have been well documented in previous research and international policy reports. In this report, therefore, we limit ourselves to a brief overview of the most important preconditions and recommendations that have been developed by previous research.

A key document in this context is the 1996 *Quality targets in services for young children* (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996). The document provides a comprehensive set of 40 'targets' (which were deemed achievable within a 10-year time frame at the date of publication), addressing necessary conditions and responsibilities across all layers of the ECEC system, including a focus on adequate public investment. Other key documents with policy recommendations drawn from research evidence include the findings of the EPPE study (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004), the OECD Starting Strong I+II reports (OECD, 2001, 2006), the 'Children in Europe Policy Paper' (Children in Europe, 2008), UNICEF 'Report Card 8' (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008), a report on early childhood policies in Europe (NESSE, 2009), a EURYDICE review focusing on early childhood and inequality (Eurydice, 2009), and the aforementioned 'Care work in Europe' and SEEPRO studies (Cameron & Moss, 2007; Oberhuemer et al., 2010).

Recurrent preconditions that are known to enhance service qualities are:

- staff/child ratios,
- group size,
- working conditions (all qualified ECEC staff should be ideally paid a salary in line with that of primary school teachers)
- continuity of staff

8.1.2 Adequate public investment

In several EU countries ECEC saw considerable growth in the 1970s, resulting in an ageing workforce today. Considering that large parts of the workforce will be retiring in the next decade, with simultaneous and considerable expansion of ECEC, we can expect the introduction of many new workers to this field. This situation offers unique opportunities for raising staff qualification. Yet at the same time it is a challenge not to lose the expertise (know-how and *know-why*) that has been built up in the field. Whether the foreseeable change in the workforce will be an important step forward or indeed a regression crucially depends on policy decisions regarding staff competences. Public investment in ECEC is crucial and a series of policy documents advise that at least 1% of GDP should be allocated to ECEC (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996; OECD, 2006; UNICEF Report Card 8;).

Many of these previous reports have also included policy recommendations on staff qualifications and/or staff competences.

8.1.3 Increasing the proportion of graduates (at BA level, ISCED 5)

Researchers agree that the level of initial professional preparation for ECEC core practitioners should be set at BA level (ISCED 5) and many international reports recommend minimal percentages of BA-level practitioners in ECEC. Sixty per cent is usually mentioned as a benchmark (European Childcare Network, 1996; EPPE, 2004; Care Work in Europe, 2007; UNICEF, 2008; Eurydice, 2009).

Our study supports this recommendation. Quality of ECEC would need at least one qualified (ISCED 5) staff member in each 'classroom' or with each group of children who shares responsibilities with other qualified team members. Furthermore, our study sheds some light on the *content* of these programs for initial professional preparation as well as on their *structure*.

Although our study clearly supports the need to raise the level of qualifications for early childhood practitioners, we also want to point to recommendations made by a working group of experts on Teacher Education (Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications, 2005): (school) teaching is seen as a graduate profession at Master's level. There can, in principle, be no justification for applying different (lower) standards to the early childhood profession. From a systemic perspective it needs to be added that *inclusive* professionalisation needs *diversification* as well as a *general increase* of formal qualifications. This means that the full range of qualifications, including MA and doctoral level, needs to be available to the ECEC profession.

8.2 CoRe recommendations at regional and national level

8.2.1 Ensure equal and reciprocal relationships between theory and practice

Besides the obvious and essential body of knowledge and the acquisition of specific skills, it is crucial that graduates are offered possibilities to build reflective capacities. Therefore, reciprocal relationships between theory and practice are essential. The case study of ESSSE (Lyon, France) shows how higher education programmes offered by universities/training institutes/colleges can be organised in close collaboration with ECEC institutions. Their close collaboration guarantees a reciprocal interaction between theory and practice in both learning environments, and supports the development of critical reflection as a core professional competence during initial professional preparation. The case study on the Danish *paedagog* shows other possibilities of including practical aspects within tertiary education institutions (e.g. through the activity-and-culture subjects). It also provides a source of inspiration for possible ways of shaping a body of knowledge related to a holistic vision of the child and children's learning through a focus on broad competences, including social and cultural competences.

This approach, suggested in CoRe case studies, is widely recognised in international literature (Bayer, 2000; Galliani & Felisatti, 2001-2005; Nigris, 2004; Wittorski, 2005; Barbier, 2006).

8.2.2 Build leadership capacity

Building *leadership* capacity is a crucial precondition for ensuring strong, reciprocal and equal relationships between theory and practice. At European level, this has long been recognised for compulsory education. Effective leadership is seen as a 'major factor in shaping the overall teaching

and learning environment, raising aspirations and providing support for children, parents and staff' (Council of the European Union, 2009c). The Council's conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders conclude that 'it is of *key importance that school leaders are not overburdened with administrative tasks and concentrate on essential matters, such as quality of learning, the curriculum, pedagogical issues and staff performance, motivation and development* (Council of the European Union, 2009c, p.3). The increasingly complex task of early childhood education and care institutions requires the same level of attention and investment in leadership capacities. The English model of introducing and supporting the role of *early years professionals* as potential *change agents* is one example of a national approach to building leadership capacity.

8.2.3 Develop effective policies that address the entire ECEC system

The case studies and survey conducted by CoRe provide ample evidence that increasing staff competences is a multi-layered matter. It is not a question of choice between the different levels. There may be different starting-points according to the specific ECEC context in different countries (e.g. an immediate need to introduce qualification pathways for formally unqualified workers or the necessity for better coordination between training institutions and service providers) but in order to be effective, policies will have to address the entire early childhood system.

The following recommendations have to be considered in this context. They acknowledge and cherish European diversity, the wealth of inspiring practices, and the considerable variation of ECEC provision both between and within European countries and regions, based on diverse historical and socio-cultural backgrounds. They do not aim at unifying professionalisation of ECEC systems across the 27 EU Member States. The focus is on addressing the systemic conditions for improving professional practice, and for developing and supporting multiple pathways towards systemic professionalisation of the entire workforce including auxiliary workers.

8.2.4 Rethink continuous professional development

The quality of services and the competence level of staff depend on, but are not only the result of, individual initial preparation. Different pathways to professionalisation are possible and there is ample evidence, both from literature and from the case studies, that comprehensive and long-term in-service professional development initiatives can yield beneficial effects equal to those of initial professional preparation. Short-term in-service training courses (e.g. a few days per year), however, are not sufficient. This demands a re-think of existing approaches to continuing professional development towards more sustained and comprehensive approaches. The case studies from Ghent and Pistoia show for example that practitioners can substantially enhance their reflective practices through participating in continuing professional development programs within the framework of practice-based research and action-research projects. The case of Slovenia shows how centre-based professional development initiatives, supported by school directors, are critical factors in determining the quality of teamwork (teachers and assistants) and the improvement of pedagogical practices at school level.

The cases of Pistoia and Ghent may serve as a source of inspiration in terms of how local policymakers can organise systems of comprehensive support that enable low-qualified practitioners to develop impressive reflective competences. These cases give some insights into the role of the

pedagogista (or *pedagogisch begeleider*, pedagogical coordinator, adviser – people who support the team in the development of their professional competences).

8.2.5 Increase job mobility

Both horizontal and vertical mobility need to be further developed within the early years system; 'dead-end jobs' are no incentive for individual development (OECD, 2006; SEEPRO, 2010). The CoRe study supports these previous findings and demonstrates that different pathways are possible to enhance job mobility through professional development.

The experiences of Croatia show opportunities for accrediting in-service professional development or prior learning experiences. These, however, need to be accompanied by a formal recognition that enables vertical job mobility.

The case study from the *collège cooperatif* of ESSSE (Lyon, France) shows another possible pathway: combining work and tertiary education in a close collaboration between the initial training institute and ECEC provisions enables unqualified staff to reach the ISCED 5 level. The case of Jydsk University College (Aarhus, Denmark) also offers an interesting example of how pedagogical co-helpers can access pedagogue professional preparation programs through a system of credits (merit education pedagogue).

8.2.6 Include assistants in adapted qualifying routes

According to the findings of the CoRe survey, a large part of the workforce in many countries consists of assistants with either no or low formal qualifications. Policies for professionalisation and job mobility need to consider that in most EU countries lower-qualified assistants have less access to continuing professional development than their qualified peers.

The role of the assistant needs more attention, especially in relation to the EU goals of combating child poverty and fostering diversity and social cohesion, as stated in the ET 2020 and the Commission's communication on ECEC (2011b). In contexts of socio-economic and ethnic diversity, underrepresented groups (e.g. members of ethnic, cultural, linguistic minorities and marginalised groups) need to be specifically targeted to ensure their access to professional qualifications.

The CoRe survey, as well as the case studies, documents several possible ways to take up this challenge. In some cases unqualified staff gain access to higher education while remaining on the job (see for instance the case of ESSSE, France), whereas in others specific recruitment strategies are put in place to facilitate the access of ethnic minorities to initial professional preparation programs for pedagogues (e.g. the pre-course at JYDSK-VIA University College). In cases in which collegial orientation to professional learning tends to prevail within ECEC institutions (e.g. Pistoia, Slovenia, Ghent), auxiliary staff benefit from the same professional development initiatives as their qualified peers and share a culture of reflection. The case of the English early years professional status shows another possibility: introducing a graduate professional status that – albeit not a qualification – can help acknowledge previously acquired competences in the field.

As these examples suggest, a competent system offers opportunities (and time) for all members of the workforce, including assistants, to take part in planning and evaluation activities.

8.3 CoRe recommendations at European level

In line with ET 2020, the Commission's Communication on ECEC (2011b), and the Council conclusions on ECEC (2011), it is very important that the European Commission continues to promote ECEC as a public good of general interest and as an integral part of the educational systems of Member States, aiming at free and universal access with specific resources directed at the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

The quality of provision and every child's right to education need as much attention as the quantity (accessibility and affordability). Early childhood education and care can promote social inclusion and form the basis for lifelong learning. Considering the key role of the workforce in terms of quality, outcomes and achievement, there should be as much attention given to their qualification and competence in European policy documents as those of school teachers.

The European Commission should be proactive in initiating and encouraging discussions within and across Member States about the purpose, goals and values of education, including early childhood education, in order to promote holistic views on education that foster all aspects of individual, inter-personal and social development.

Systematically initiating open and critical learning communities is crucial for reflection and joint learning for practitioners, management, policymakers and researchers. Therefore, transnational exchanges of different professional groups involved in ECEC need to be stimulated.

As a consequence, we strongly support the decision of the Commission to promote exchange of policies and practices regarding ECEC through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Qualification and professionalisation of the ECEC workforce should be named as a specific theme within the OMC.

Within its capacities, the European Commission should take initiatives to:

- Work towards a European framework for quality of early childhood provision to complement the agreed quantitative targets. Quality indicators developed within this framework should have a specific (but not an only) focus on the workforce and systemic approaches to professionalisation;

- Develop European guidelines to support Member States to implement research and policy recommendations;

- Document and disseminate good practice examples in order to ensure they are accessible by policymakers and practitioners;

- Support and conduct European research that is conscious of, and relevant to, the diverse contexts of European ECEC systems;

- Make accessible the wealth of European research, literature and debate that exists beyond the English-language world;

- Systematically encourage, fund and build transnational and multidimensional networks and critical learning communities of practitioners, parents, local and national policymakers and academics.

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