



Professionalisation of Childcare Assistants in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Pathways towards Qualification

NESET II AR1/2016 Executive Summary



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AUTHORS:

- **Jan Peeters**, VBJK, University of Gent (BE)
- **Nima Sharmahd**, VBJK
- **Irma, Budginaitė**, PPMI

CONTRIBUTORS:

- **Rūta Mašidlauskaitė**, PPMI
- **Florence Pirard**, Belgium (fr)
- **Christele Van Nieuwenhuyzen**, Belgium (fl)
- **Stig Lund and Jytte Juul Jensen**, Denmark
- **Marie Paul Thollon Behar and Myriam Mony**, France
- **Katerina Vassilikou**, Greece
- **Noirin Hayes**, Ireland
- **Regina Sabaliauskienė**, Lithuania
- **Anna del Barrio and Anke van Keulen**, the Netherlands
- **Theresa Ogrodzinska**, Poland
- **Carmen Anghelescu**, Romania
- **Tatjana Vonta and Jerneja Jager**, Slovenia
- **Ana Ancheta**, Spain
- **Ana Tonberg**, Sweden
- **Claire Cameron and Linda Miller**, the United Kingdom
- **Inge Schreyer and Pamela Oberhuemer**, Germany
- **Ljidia Miskelijan**, Serbia

PEER REVIEWERS:

- **Jana Huttova**, External consultant and advisor to OSF
- **Noirin Hayes**, Trinity College Dublin

LANGUAGE EDITOR:

- **Jonathan Boyd**, Freelance Copy-Editor/ Proof-reader

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CONTRACTOR:



Public Policy and Management Institute
Gedimino ave. 50, LT - 01110 Vilnius, Lithuania
Phone: +370 5 2620338 Fax: +370 5 2625410
www.ppmi.lt

Director Haroldas Brožaitis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a broad consensus among researchers, organizations and policy makers that the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC), and ultimately the outcomes for children and families, depends on well-educated and competent staff. At the European level, the importance of a qualified workforce is acknowledged in the revised priorities for the strategic cooperation in the field of education and training (European Commission, 2015a); it identifies professionalisation of staff as one of the key issues for further work in ECEC. Several studies and reports have underlined that quality in ECEC is dependent upon competent staff who are capable of working within a holistic framework, that understand the concepts of 'care' and 'education' to be interdependent and on equal footing (UNESCO, 2010; European Commission, 2011; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014) (see the section 'Holistic approach' in the Introduction).

The European Quality Framework for ECEC (EC Thematic Group on ECEC, 2014) underlines the contribution the ECEC workforce makes towards enhancing the pedagogical quality of services for young children. The European Quality Framework for ECEC is the consensus of representatives from 25 EU Member States, plus Turkey and Norway, the Eurydice Network, the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the OECD. It states that 'recognizing the ECEC workforce as professionals is key. Professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes. Developing common education and training programmes for all staff working in an ECEC context (e.g. preschool teachers, assistants, educators, family day carers etc.), helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality' (EC Thematic Group on ECEC, 2014, 9).

As pointed out by the CoRe study (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016), individual competences alone are insufficient to ensure quality. A 'competent system' is needed, which includes collaborations between individuals, teams and institutions, and which has competent governance at policy level. Moreover, a competent system is described as one that builds upon staff's initial good education with continuous professional development, which includes providing staff with regular opportunities to co-reflect with their team members on their ideas and practices.

Creating competent systems continues to be a challenge in the EU: the requirements and competences for ECEC workers differ between countries, the qualifications of ECEC staff in Europe remain low (see 2.2., Table 2), and generally there is too little investment in strong systems of continuous professional development (see 2.4.).

In many countries, part of the workforce is represented by low qualified ECEC assistants. In the CoRe study, assistants are defined as 'invisible workers', meaning that their presence is usually not taken into account in policy documents, and that they have far fewer possibilities of qualification and of professional development than core practitioners do. Data from the last Eurydice report shows that ECEC attendance among children under 3 is very low across Europe (European commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). The same report underlines that for about 30 % of parents, the low quality of ECEC services represents a barrier to use them. Improving the competences of all staff (core practitioners and assistants) would improve the services' quality, which would in turn attract parents to ECEC services.

Investing in the professionalization of assistants represents a key element for ECEC quality improvement, especially since in a number of countries the share of assistants in the services is rapidly growing (see 2.1., Table 1). This growth needs to be accompanied by a strong investment in competent systems that value the contributions of all staff, and involve the whole workforce in continuous professional development. Otherwise, in response to budget constraints or if reforms are too hurried, assistants may be hired over their more qualified colleagues and this could lead to a "deprofessionalisation" of ECEC staff.

Building on the findings of the CoRe study (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016), we review the profiles of ECEC assistants in 15 European countries¹ and their professionalization opportunities. We then make recommendations on how to develop coherent pathways towards qualification and continuous professional development (CPD) for assistants. In addition, we present examples of successful pathways towards qualification and CPD in three selected European countries (Denmark, France, Slovenia).

Key findings

The first part of our report gives an overview on the situation concerning assistants in the 15 Member States involved in the study.

The data indicates that:

- The ‘invisibility’ of the ECEC assistants in research and policy documents stands in sharp contrast to the number of assistants working in ECEC services, which in some countries can be quite high (40-50 % of the workforce) (for a close look on the share of assistants in each country, see 2.1., Table 1).
- Assistants often have low or no qualification (see 2.2., Table 2) and there are few opportunities for them to start a path towards the same qualification as that of a core practitioner. We suggest that assistants don’t necessarily need to have a specific initial qualification for the job as assistant, but once they are hired, there needs to be a strong investment in competent systems which respect and reward the work of all staff (including assistants). We also suggest that assistants can be given job mobility opportunities by investing in adapted pathways towards qualification (see 3.2.1. and 3.2.3.).
- Assistants have fewer opportunities of continuous professional development than core practitioners do (see 2.4.). Time to plan and reflect together as team with core practitioners is also lacking. Most European countries still do not fund non-contact time for staff, and when this time is allocated, it is usually to core practitioners alone, not assistants. However, our study describes some notable exceptions where countries allocated time to all staff, including assistants, for co-reflection and continuous in-service training (see 2.4. and 3.2.2.).
- Generally speaking, assistants do not have official competence profiles, either for their profession or for their training. The descriptions of competences in countries that do happen to have them are often described and framed as technical or ‘caring’ tasks. Even when the position and competences of assistants are recognised by national regulations or in individual settings, assistants are at risk of being perceived as merely technical workers. This division of labour between core practitioners and assistants may reinforce a hierarchy between education and care, one that reduces education to cognitive development (Van Laere et al., 2012). This perspective impedes a holistic approach to education and care, one that recognises the educative role of caring and the caring role of education (Hayes, 2007; 2008).
- The countries included in this study do not collect statistics about the socio-economic or cultural background of assistants in their respective ECEC sectors. However, according to the national experts consulted in this study, the share of practitioners with ethnic minority background may indeed be higher among assistants than among core practitioners. The presence of assistants within the ECEC workforce contributes to its diversity, which may increase the ability of staff to effectively engage with the diversities and commonalities amongst children and families. In order to improve these aspects, a

¹ The countries analyzed in this study are: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands.

strong path of CPD, during which practitioners reflect on their pedagogical practice under the supervision of pedagogical guidance, is needed.

The examples from the three selected countries show how it can be possible to invest in:

- 1) specific adapted pathways that give assistants the possibility of raising their qualification, making it possible to combine working and studying. This can happen by: a) creating specific quota systems in which a certain number of places on a bachelor training course is reserved for experienced but unqualified workers; b) building-bridge courses for people with ethnic minority background and low socio-economic status; c) recognizing previously acquired competences; d) repeatedly relating theory to practice during the studies; e) supporting the team that the assistant works with to help them all cope with the change of professional identity the assistant-student may experience over the course of the training (see recommendation n. 3).
- 2) opportunities of continuous professional development for all staff, including assistants. This requires investment in a) child-free hours for core practitioners and assistants; b) meetings to reflect together on their pedagogical practice; c) a system of pedagogical guidance or coaching; d) a system of monitoring that guarantees that assistants get the opportunity to follow the established CPD (see recommendations).

Specifically, Denmark gives an example concerning adapted pathways towards qualification; France provides a specific qualifying initial training for low qualified professionals who wish to combine work and study; Slovenia gives an interesting example concerning the investment in continuous professional development for the whole staff.

Key policy implications and recommendations

Our study recommends several strategies that address the condition of assistants in the ECEC sector. Policy experimentation in EU Member States should combine these strategies, beginning with small scale experimentations.

The main conclusions and recommendations of this report are:

- A hierarchical division between education and care exists in both split and unitary systems, which is reinforced when distinctions are drawn between the roles of core practitioners and assistants. In contrast, a holistic view of education and care, in which cognitive, emotional, and social aspects are assigned the same value and are seen to be interdependent – advises that such distinctions be downplayed.

Recommendations

Policies towards ECEC should be focused on the **integration of care and education** across institutional, regional and national levels.

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

- Assistants remain ‘invisible workers’, meaning that their presence is usually not taken into account in policy documents. Data on assistants in European countries, their educational and socio-cultural background, competences, gender and other socio-demographic characteristics are insufficient.

Recommendations

Policy makers should make this group visible by collecting nationwide data about the number of assistants, their gender and socio-cultural background.

Assistants should be mentioned and included in all policy documents that refer to staff in the ECEC sector.

At an international level (OECD’s, TALIS for ECEC...), data collection concerning staff in the ECEC sector should include data on assistants.

- Assistants have fewer possibilities to raise their qualification. There is a need to develop adapted pathways to qualification for assistants. Assistants should not necessarily need to have a specific initial qualification when they start working, but once they are hired, there ought to be opportunities of job mobility for them, through adapted pathways towards qualification. This does not mean that all assistants need to enter a path towards a qualification. It simply means that a competent system should attract those who want a qualification towards one, and facilitate their path.

Recommendations

Policy makers need to create pathways to the same level of qualification as the core practitioners, with specific attention to: 1) recognizing assistants’ working experience and previously acquired competences; 2) linking theory and practice by methods of group reflections on practice; 3) foreseeing pedagogical guidance in the service; 4) supporting students with an ethnic minority background and with low socio-economic status.

- The employment of assistants is an important tool to attract more male educators, which benefit from being put in contact with networks of other male practitioners during their pathway towards qualification.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should create pathways to qualification designed to attract **male assistants**, and place male assistants into networks with other male educators.

Employment offices should act to attract **young males** to the profession of assistant, then guide them towards a qualification as core practitioners.

- Several experts underline that a high number of assistants, especially in larger cities, have an ethnic-minority background or low socio-economic status. Their qualifications, language, gender, and socio-cultural background, lend diversity to the ECEC workforce.

Recommendations

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

- The individual competences of the ECEC workforce should be placed within ‘competent systems’, in which a good initial training for core practitioners, and adapted pathways to qualification for assistants, is followed up with continuous professional development activities for all staff.

Recommendations

Policy makers in Member States should invest in establishing **continuous professional development for all staff**,

including assistants. In order to deliver, there must be:

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

- The competences and experiences used for the job as assistant are rarely valued or articulated as part of a distinctive professional profile; there are only rarely official professional and training competence profiles for assistants.

Recommendations

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

- Considering the diverse society we live in, ECEC staff (core professionals and assistants) needs complex broad competences to become able to dialogue, to negotiate and to reflect on practice.

Recommendations

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

- More research is needed in this sector to know what roles assistants develop in ECEC, how assistants perceive their role, and whether the presence of assistants widens the gap between care and education.

Recommendations

Policy makers and research centres should finance further research in this field, with specific attention to exploring the different roles of assistants.

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