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CARE
Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of
European ECEC

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Early childhood education and care: Promoting quality for individual, social and economic benefits

D3.1: Comparative review of professional development approaches

D3.1 Short summary

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Executive Summary

This report examines pre-service and in-service professional development strategies of early childhood education and care (ECEC) educators across 10 European countries from a variety of angles. Data were collected through a comprehensive questionnaire that posed open questions regarding the current resources, practices, policies, standards and innovative approaches undertaken in each country. Results are to directly contribute to the Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European ECEC (CARE) project's workpackage 3 (WP3) objective of researching ECEC systems in terms of their significance and potential to increase learning and wellbeing for children.

The report addresses the following research questions:

1. Are countries' policies and professional development systems (pre-service and in-service) aimed at strengthening educational attainment and competence development among ECEC staff likely to lead to improved professional competences in meeting the range of demands and challenges of today's societies?
2. To what extent are professional development systems responding to increasing expectations that ECEC staff are able to identify and implement standards for high-quality services and meet children's needs, both in general and for the most vulnerable?
3. Which conditions (e.g. resources, policy and local authorities' prioritisation of high-level services) are provided for professional competence development (pre-service) and for sustainable workforce development (in-service), and to what extent are innovative approaches to ECEC systems under development in CARE's participating European countries?

A cross-country analysis sheds light on the differences, similarities and overall trends in European ECEC systems across six themes:

1. Pre-service professional development: ECEC educators' qualification requirements, standards and resources: A broad trend can be identified towards greater standardisation and academisation, with increasing demand for university level qualifications resulting in practical experience being replaced by theoretical knowledge. Reflective and competence-based approaches which link knowledge and practice appear best suited to preparing ECEC professionals for contemporary challenges.
2. Characteristics of in-service professional development for ECEC educators: While there are vast differences between countries in terms of resources and regulation of in-service training, two opposing approaches have emerged. The first places responsibility for continuing professional development with the individual (or e.g. professional organisations) in an entirely decentralised system with little or no regulation. The second places responsibility with national or local authorities which establish systems for continual professional development (with varying degrees of transparency and regulation) and provide some degree of support and resources. While there is an increased focus on pre-service qualifications of ECEC educators, in most countries, as well as within research, the potential benefits of a more systematic approach to in-service professional development, and of establishing strong links between pre-service and in-service professional development, remain largely unexplored and unexploited.
3. ECEC educators' role, responsibility and quality concepts: There are considerable differences with regard to the degree of standardisation in terms of defining the role and responsibility of ECEC educators and the concept of quality ECEC provision. In the majority of countries, however, these areas remain self-governed, either at the local authority level or the institutional level. It is important that future developments of pre-service and in-service professional development are closely linked to conceptions of the role, responsibility and quality of ECEC provision.

4. Policy developments and reforms: Reforms centre on the following issues: raising qualification standards of ECEC professionals; increasing the proportion of staff with professional qualifications; a greater integration of ECEC systems that split children aged zero to three and three to six; and improving access to in-service professional development. While the approaches taken vary considerably between countries, the overall picture is one of a greater focus on quality (regarded as closely linked to staff qualification levels) and a greater degree of standardisation.
5. Quality assurance regulation, monitoring and evaluation: Three approaches to quality assurance can be identified: a centralised system whereby all ECEC provision is evaluated according to standard criteria by an independent body; a decentralised system whereby ECEC providers evaluate themselves according to criteria determined by providers in cooperation with local authorities (although often within the framework of regional or national guidelines); and a stakeholder-based approach which supplements self-evaluation with, for example, parental evaluation. While a centralised approach works towards ensuring uniform quality standards, it may be seen as focused on control rather than development, disempowering ECEC professionals and stifling innovation. A system based on self-evaluation, meanwhile, ensures assessment is strongly linked to practice and acknowledges professional knowledge and expertise, but risks insularity, with no outside influences to help drive innovation. Finally, a stakeholder-based approach ensures direct accountability and immediate feedback from multiple perspectives; however, there is also a risk that professional knowledge may be devalued as providers are expected to respond to the 'market' in the form of stakeholder critique – quality ECEC provision may not always correspond with the demands of stakeholder groups.
6. Highlights of innovative approaches: One common approach to innovation within ECEC is establishing closer ties between policy, research and practice, both in terms of incorporating research findings within practice and ensuring that research is firmly rooted in practice (macro-level). Another promising approach involves developing the innovative competences of both the individual ECEC professional (linked to concepts such as the reflective practitioner and lifelong learning) (micro-level) and the ECEC organisation (approaches to organisational learning, communities of practice, etc.; meso-level). There is a need for greater understanding of how best to cultivate innovation within ECEC settings.

The analyses and findings led to three additional insights: the trend of increased (critical) reflection in practice; European ECEC systems' disparate strategies of addressing and responding to the most vulnerable children; and innovative approaches that build on professional development networks and communities of practice.

WP3's research questions and insights from the cross-case analyses led to following three recommendations:

New evidence-based longitudinal studies to more adequately address the strengthening of ECEC educators' competences with the aim of improving child outcomes;

More comprehensive and focused studies on who the 'vulnerable' are across Europe and working with ECEC educators to globally enhance process quality;

Policy to better support the creation and uses of innovative practices by fostering greater interaction between policymakers, research communities and ECEC educators and leaders.

Every country is in a process of rethinking, renewing and implementing professional development. They are looking for sustainable and *innovative practices*, trying to network within their systems and between countries, moving towards better monitoring and evaluation standards/processes/instruments. This common trend make the comparison and dialogue between countries particularly 'generative'

and useful. There is a strong discourse that confronts the trends of restricted resources and discriminatory provisions. However, a variety of innovative practices that draw on collaborations between stakeholders counter these trends and foster a new awareness across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of European ECEC that can lead to the continuous enhancement of high-quality ECEC. Of additional importance is the question addressing to what extent European ECEC affects child outcomes. This question will be addressed in WP3's D3.2. Furthermore, developing and implementing innovative approaches in ECEC is of great interest and importance. In WP3's D3.3 such contributions are explored through case studies in three European countries.