



## Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

### RESEARCH BRIEF: QUALIFICATIONS, EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MATTER

#### What are “qualifications, education and professional development” in ECEC?

ECEC qualifications indicate the recognised level and types of knowledge, skills and competencies that ECEC staff have received.<sup>1</sup> Formal education in ECEC refers to the level and type of education that ECEC staff pursue to acquire such knowledge, skills and competencies to work in the sector. Professional development provides opportunities for staff who are already working in the sector to update or enhance their practices; it is often referred to as “in-service training”, “continuous education” or “professional training”.

#### What is at stake?

Recent social changes have challenged traditional views of childhood and child rearing: 1) the changing socio-economic role of women, 2) growing ethnic diversity of developed countries, and 3) changing views on (early) education and the purpose of (early) education. The last two changes have important consequences for what is expected of those who work with young children.

As pointed out by the OECD teachers’ review (OECD, 2005), education systems need to invest in intensive teacher education and training if teachers are to deliver high-quality outcomes. This also refers to the ECEC sector (OECD, 2006). Specific knowledge, skills and competencies are expected of ECEC practitioners. There is a general consensus, supported by research, that well-educated, well-trained professionals are the key factor in providing high-quality ECEC with the most favourable cognitive and social outcomes for children. Research shows that the behaviour of those who work in ECEC matters and that this is related to their education and training. The qualifications, education and training of ECEC staff are, therefore, an important policy issue (OECD, 2006).

In spite of the consensus on the importance of well-trained staff, governments often fear the funding consequences of raising staff qualifications. Higher qualifications can be followed by increased wage demands, which, in turn, contribute significantly to the costs of services. Although the evidence is strong that improved training and qualification levels raise the quality of interaction and pedagogy in ECEC services – and similar evidence exists in favour of staff qualifications – governments often choose not to invest in raising qualifications or funding staff training (OECD, 2006). This might seriously affect ECEC quality, and with this, child development outcomes, since staff are not being optimally trained or educated to stimulate early learning and development.

Although research emphasises the high relevance of adequate staff initial education and continuous professional development opportunities, large differences occur between countries in

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<sup>1</sup> In the literature, “staff” is the term that is usually used to refer to those who work directly with children in the ECEC field. They are also referred to as “professionals”, “teachers”, “caregivers” or “practitioners”.

terms of which qualifications are being asked of ECEC practitioners. Opportunities to participate in professional development and in-service training also vary greatly across countries and between education and child care in split systems. The qualification requirements vary from no formal education at all to a specialised bachelor's or even master's degree, and professional development and training ranges from being compulsory to being based on voluntary will in combination with no additional funding for training (OECD, 2006).

Often there is a difference between the qualifications required to work with very young children (up to three or four years of age) and the qualifications needed to be a teacher for children age four to primary school age. This is especially the case in countries with a so-called split system: children ages zero to three or four attend different ECEC institutions (often day care services) than those ages three or four to primary schooling age, who more regularly attend pre-primary services. In countries with an integrated system where all young children (age zero to primary school age) attend the same centres, all practitioners usually have to meet the same requirements in terms of education and training (Eurydice, 2009; OECD, 2006). The latter encourages continuous child development throughout the ECEC years and ensures greater professionalism of staff working with both younger and older children (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000).

### Why do qualifications, education and professional development matter?

Staff qualifications/education/professional development → pedagogical quality → child outcomes

The main importance of staff lies in their effect on the process and content quality of ECEC<sup>2</sup> (Sheridan, 2009; Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson, in press 2011). The training and education of ECEC staff affects the quality of services and outcomes primarily through the knowledge, skills and competencies that are transmitted and encouraged by practitioners. It is also considered important that staff believe in their ability to organise and execute the courses of action necessary to bring about desired results (Fives, 2003). Qualifications can matter in terms of which skill sets and what knowledge are recognised as important for working with young children. The skills and staff traits that research identifies as important in facilitating high-quality services and outcomes are:

- Good understanding of child development and learning;
- Ability to develop children's perspectives;
- Ability to praise, comfort, question and be responsive to children;
- Leadership skills, problem solving and development of targeted lesson plans; and
- Good vocabulary and ability to elicit children's ideas.

However, it is not the qualification *per se* that has an impact on child outcomes but the ability of better qualified staff members to create a high-quality pedagogic environment that makes the difference (Elliott, 2006; Sheridan *et al.*, 2009). There is strong evidence that enriched stimulating environments and high-quality pedagogy are fostered by better qualified staff; and better quality pedagogy leads to better learning outcomes (Litjens and Taguma, 2010). Key elements of high

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<sup>2</sup> "Process quality" refers to what children actually experience in their programmes: that which happens within a setting. "Content quality" specifically refers to the substance of what is being learned (e.g., curriculum).

staff quality are the way staff involve children and stimulate interaction with and between children as well as staff's scaffolding strategies, such as guiding, modelling and questioning.

More specialised staff education and training on ECEC are strongly associated with stable, sensitive and stimulating interactions (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). Other elements of high staff quality include staff's content (curriculum) knowledge and their ability to create a multi-disciplinary learning environment (Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson, in press 2011).

## What matters most?

### *Level of education and/or pedagogical practices*

Studies that have addressed the question of whether higher staff qualifications lead to better pedagogical practice have yielded mixed results. There are various studies showing that, generally, a higher level of education is associated with higher pedagogic quality in ECEC settings. One study found that preschool teachers with bachelor's degrees were the most effective practitioners. Their effectiveness was measured within the classroom and based on stimulation, responsiveness and engagement of the children in learning activities (Howes *et al.*, 2003). The results of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study from England (United Kingdom) have also shown that key explanatory factors for high-quality ECEC were related to "staff with higher qualifications, staff with leadership skills and long-serving staff; trained staff working alongside and supporting less qualified staff; staff with a good understanding of child development and learning" (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Higher proportions of staff with low-level qualifications were related with less favourable child outcomes in the socio-emotional domain (social relationships with their peers and co-operation).

However, the general conclusion that higher education of ECEC staff leads to higher pedagogical quality and, therefore, to better child outcomes is not supported by all studies. Early *et al.* (2007) emphasise that teacher quality is a very complex issue. There is no simple relationship between the level of education of staff and classroom quality or learning outcomes. They studied the relationship between child outcomes and staff qualifications and found no, or contradictory, associations between the two. They argue that increasing staff education will not suffice for improving classroom quality or maximising children's academic gains. Instead, raising the effectiveness of early childhood education will likely require a broad range of professional development activities and support for staff's interactions with children. An area that can improve pedagogical practices of ECEC staff includes supporting staff's competence to communicate and interact with children in a shared and sustainable manner (Sheridan *et al.*, 2009).

Research also points out that it is not necessary that all staff have high general levels of education. Highly qualified staff can have a positive influence on those who work with them and who do not have the same high qualifications. The EPPE study finds that the observed behaviour of lower-qualified staff turned out to be positively influenced by working alongside highly trained staff (Sammons, 2010).

### *Specialised education and training*

Not only the level of education but also the content of the staff's educational or training curriculum is important for the level of quality in ECEC. Specialised education is associated with better child outcomes and improved staff competences to provide suitable pedagogical learning opportunities. Specialisation can refer to "any education or training focusing on early childhood

education, child development or similar, above and beyond general educational attainments” (Litjens and Taguma, 2010).

Initial education and training in areas such as early child development and early education increase the likelihood that practitioners are effective in promoting the educational, socio-emotional and healthy development of children.

The practitioners’ ability to create rich, stimulating environments in ECEC is jeopardised when staff have inadequate, insufficient or incorrect content and pedagogical knowledge. When trained on matters related to early development and care, staff can better develop a child’s perspective (Sommer *et al.*, 2010); are better able to integrate playing and learning into practice (Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson, 2009); have increased ability to solve problems and develop targeted lesson plans; and have an improved vocabulary, which stimulates early literacy development (NIEER, 2004). Additionally, staff with higher education *and* specialised training engage in more positive teacher-child interactions including praising, comforting, questioning and being responsive to children (Howes *et al.*, 2003).

However, specialised education and training does not *guarantee* greater effectiveness (Hyson *et al.*, 2009). The quality of the education or training programme may be a more critical factor in staff’s ability to stimulate children’s development and learning. There is a strong need for good initial staff preparation; and there is a call for greater consistency across initial professional preparation programmes to enhance quality (Elliot, 2006).

Ongoing education and training are also important. Research shows that in order for staff to maintain their professional quality, they need to engage in ongoing professional development<sup>3</sup>. A well-trained practitioner does not only have a good initial level of education but makes sure that the effects of initial education do not fade out (Fukkink and Lont, 2007; Mitchell and Cubey, 2003). Ongoing professional development has the potential to fill in the knowledge and skills that staff may be lacking or require updating due to changes in particular knowledge fields. This is especially crucial in ECEC where new programmes are being developed continuously. The body of research on what works is growing, the discussions on quality in ECEC are ongoing, and the focus has changed to a developmental perspective.

In-service (ongoing) education and training can be conducted “on the job” or can be provided by an external source, such as training institutes or colleges. It can be provided through for instance staff meetings, workshops, conferences, subject training, field-based consultation training, supervised practices and mentoring. The key to effective professional development is identifying the right training strategies to help ECEC practitioners stay updated on scientifically based methods and curriculum subject knowledge so as to be able to apply this knowledge in their work (Litjens and Taguma, 2010). It also pointed out that it should continue over a longer period of time: staff should have long-term or regular opportunities for training (Sheridan, 2001). Only when learning experiences are targeted to the needs of staff and are true learning experiences with development opportunities can professional development have favourable outcomes (Mitchell and Cubey, 2003).

An effective way of improving knowledge and skills is found to be subject training. Field-based consultation can also be very effective, as it provides ECEC staff with the possibility to receive feedback on their practices. Furthermore, practitioners who do not have a degree, but who attend

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<sup>3</sup> “Ongoing professional development” refers to in-service education and training. Litjens and Taguma (2010) give a clear definition of in-service education. This “includes all planned programmes of learning opportunities for staff members of ECEC providers for the purpose of improving the performance of individuals in already assigned positions”.

ECEC-relevant professional workshops are found to provide higher quality care than colleagues who do not attend (Burchinal *et al.*, 2002). However, in general, there is little clarity about what forms of professional development are *most* effective. One of the reasons is that staff have different needs: practitioners have very different backgrounds, and effective training methods should suit these differences (Elliott, 2006).

### ***Leadership of managerial staff***

Managers play an important role in supporting professional development. Managers matter for the extent to which the centre supports, stimulates and subsidises professional development (Ackerman, 2006). Staff quality is maintained by leadership that motivates and encourages working as a team, information sharing and professional staff development (OECD, 2006). The quality of leaders and managers of ECEC services is also strongly related to their level of education and professional development, as found in the EPPE study (Sylva *et al.*, 2010).

### ***Differences between education and training for educating different age groups***

The United States National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) points out that, although staff education and training has an impact on infants and toddlers, staff's formal education is a stronger predictor for children of preschool age than for younger children (NICHD, 2000). For younger children (toddlers and infants), specialised and practical training seems to be more strongly associated with pedagogic quality and cognitive and social outcomes.

### ***Social equality and professional development***

ECEC is often seen as a vehicle to give children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds a "head start" when commencing compulsory education. Early childhood educators come across increasingly complex social environments and encounter a multiplicity of family backgrounds and experiences. These factors create imperatives to adopt new pedagogies and organisational practices to accommodate this pluralism (Elliott, 2006). In various countries, this has led to knowledge and skills requirements for staff.

In line with the issues of integration and prevention of social inequality highlighted by politicians and professionals, current and emerging content for continuing professional development include: intercultural approaches, approaches to second languages, working with children with special needs, working with children at risk and special focus on language acquisition (Eurydice, 2009). However, little is known yet about the effectiveness of these approaches.

### ***What are the policy implications?***

#### ***Raising qualifications of ECEC practitioners***

Highly qualified practitioners often provide better quality ECEC. This can yield better child outcomes, both socially and academically, not only in the short term but also in the long term. It is not necessary that all staff working in ECEC have high levels of education, which may also be impossible to realise and not desirable. However, those with lower levels of general education should work alongside those who are highly qualified.

#### ***Providing ongoing professional development to ECEC staff***

Ongoing professional development can lead to higher quality ECEC services and outcomes. Attending a workshop may be an easy way to realise means of professional development;

however, high-quality subject training, field-based consultation training or supervised practices may be more effective. Ongoing professional development should not only be available, but it should be a requirement to stay and grow in the profession. Furthermore, professional development should be tailored to staff's needs.

### ***Providing specialised training courses for those working with young children***

In-service training that provides possibilities for ECEC specialisation is considered beneficial: educating young children requires specialised skills and content knowledge, including a variety of subject and development areas.

### **What is still unknown?**

#### ***Concept of quality in ECEC***

Researchers are still debating the concept of “quality” in ECEC. Judgement of quality involves values. The effect of the education and training of teachers on the quality of ECEC depends on the definition of quality and the instrument that is used to measure this quality. Children’s developmental outcomes are often used as the most important dependent variable in assessing high-quality ECEC, but this leaves the debate open on *which* developmental outcomes should be studied.

#### ***Content of training and education of ECEC staff***

The debate around the concept of “quality” in ECEC also means that the content of the training and education of ECEC staff remains a point of discussion. Some early childhood specialists voice concerns about the suitability for young children of the emphasis on 1) standards and testing (performance rather than meaning making), 2) the teaching of predefined knowledge rather than play, discovery, personal choice and the responsibility of the child – the traditional tools of early childhood learning, and 3) the neglect in ECEC curricula of developmental readiness (see “Research Brief: Curriculum Matters”).

#### ***Effectiveness of the level of education and different in-service training strategies***

Even though correlations have been found between the level of education and pedagogical quality, the exact relationship between the two is still unclear. Also, little is known about the effectiveness of different training strategies to help ECEC practitioners stay updated. More research is needed on how to engage staff in learning about and implementing evidence-based practices (Diamond and Powell, 2011).

#### ***Knowledge, leadership and competences of managerial staff***

Focus has been on the individual qualifications of staff. Knowledge, leadership and competences of the manager have also been found to be important. Research is needed that shows how important this is and why; what kind of qualifications and training would be most relevant for managers; what would be the most effective delivery of such training; etc.

#### ***Ethnic diversity in training and education***

The effectiveness of teacher training (both initial and in-service) in which special attention is devoted to social and ethnic diversity has hardly been evaluated. This is a growing issue of importance because of the greater ethnic diversity of the population many countries are facing.



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