

# The education and care divide: The role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has recently gained acknowledgement in the European public and political sphere. Whereas political discussions regarding ECEC have traditionally focused on quantity, growing interest has been evidenced on the part of policy-makers in the quality of provision at both local and international levels (European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012; Penn, 2009). Although conceptualisations of quality vary considerably across countries, research and international policy reports show a clear consensus. Quality in ECEC should encompass a broad, holistic view on learning, caring, upbringing and social support for children. Quality services thus require both 'care' and 'education' as inseparable concepts (European Commission, 2011; Eurydice, 2009; UNESCO, 2010). In these debates, the workforce is seen as a critical factor (Oberhuemer, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Several international policy and academic reports have helped to better understand ECEC workforce profiles in European and other OECD countries since the 2000s (Cameron & Moss, 2007; Oberhuemer et al., 2010). Most, however, consider the staff profiles of core practitioners without focusing on the profiles of 'assistants' or 'auxiliary staff'. Assistants support higher-qualified core practitioners in working with children and their families. In this article, we examine their profiles in 15 European countries and relate them to the ongoing quality debate in ECEC. What is the role of assistants in quality ECEC based on a holistic conceptualisation of education and care? To analyse this question, we frame it within the context of the increasing schoolification of the early years. On the basis of academic discussions of the concept of schoolification, we argue that it can lead to an education and care divide which may be reinforced by the divided roles between assistants and core practitioners. The methodology and results of a thematic analysis are presented, followed by a discussion on the implications for practice and policy. The findings in this article are part of a European research project entitled 'Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care' (CoRe), conducted by the University of East London and the University of Ghent and funded by the European Commission (Urban et al., 2011; see article in this issue).

**Related link:** In focus: A golden opportunity? <sup>[3]</sup>

OECD in 'schoolification' warning <sup>[4]</sup>

**Region:** Europe <sup>[5]</sup>

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