

Early childhood education and care: Working conditions and training opportunities ^[1]

Working paper

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Introduction

The aim of this working paper is to provide information about the working conditions and in-service training opportunities of early childhood education and care (ECEC) workers and to describe how these factors are linked to outcomes for children. This paper is part of the research project 'Assessing childcare services' being carried out by Eurofound in 2013 and 2014. The project focuses on the two dimensions of early childhood education and care that have been the main focus of policy initiatives at European level: ensuring that services are accessible and that they are of good quality. This is the main message of the 2011 Council of the European Union conclusions on early childhood education and care; it is also one of the main messages of the 2013 European Commission recommendation 'Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage'.

Eurofound aims to provide research evidence about what works in terms of increasing the quality and accessibility of services. Quality is the main focus of research activities in 2013, while accessibility is the focus in 2014.

There are several means to achieving quality in early childhood education and care. The OECD's 'quality toolbox' for early childhood education and care lists the following five: setting out quality goals and regulations; designing and implementing curriculum and standards; improving qualifications, training and working conditions; engaging families and community; and advancing data collection, research and monitoring (OECD, 2012d). In this research project, Eurofound focuses on training and working conditions, as improving working conditions is one of the priority areas for Eurofound research activities in the period 2013-2016. Another priority area is improving standards of living and promoting social cohesion in the face of economic disparities and social inequalities. Ensuring access, quality and sustainability in public services is one of the cluster themes of Eurofound's 2013-2016 work programme. This research project provides information on these issues by looking at the impact of early childhood education and care on outcomes for children.

Eurofound initiated a systematic review - a review of research literature that follows a systematic methodology - in 2013 (to be completed in 2014) to analyse how the working conditions and training opportunities of ECEC staff relate to the interactions between staff and children and outcomes for children, with the aim of synthesising the findings of primary research studies in Europe. This paper complements that review by summarising findings from five other systematic reviews.

The paper also provides up-to-date information about the working conditions and training opportunities of ECEC staff in five Member States: Austria, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain. These countries have fairly well-developed ECEC systems in terms of coverage and different degrees of centralisation of ECEC services. They were not covered in the OECD 'Quality matters in early childhood education and care' country reports, but they were countries about which the research team was able to gather recent information regarding the current situation of workers and the latest policy initiatives.

Poor pay, lack of career progression and lack of training opportunities are some of the recurrent issues in this sector. As the research literature presented here shows, this is the case even in countries with relatively well-developed ECEC systems. Despite the public discourse highlighting the importance of services for young children and the vast amount of research underpinning this message, the working conditions of ECEC staff do not reflect the recognised importance of the early development of children (OECD, 2006). It is therefore important to make a case for investing in the workforce by showing the current situation and by providing evidence of the impact of adequate working conditions and training opportunities on the quality of services, in relation to interactions between staff and children and child development.

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