

Early childhood care: Working conditions, training and quality of services - A systematic review ^[1]

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Executive summary

Introduction

The focus of this report is on the impact of the working conditions and continuous professional development (CPD) of the workforce in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on the quality of the services provided and, in particular, on the outcomes for children. The report reviews research evidence from all 28 EU Member States, including both English and non-English language studies. The aim is to identify how the training and development of ECEC workers who operate in a range of settings might be tailored to most effectively improve the quality of the care and education services available for children below primary-school age in EU Member States.

This report adopted the systematic review methodology elaborated by the EPPI-Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London, for informing evidence-based policies. The review establishes what are known to be, on the basis of available research evidence, the links between CPD interventions, working conditions and outcomes for children. In so doing, it aims to inform policymakers' decisions on effective strategies for sustaining the quality of ECEC through investment in its workforce.

Policy context

In the quest for high-quality services, recent EU and OECD policy documents highlight that improving the working conditions and enhancing the professional development of the ECEC workforce are critical in meeting the dual challenge of providing equitable access to services while also improving the quality of provision.

The European Council conclusions on early childhood education and care from May 2011 notes that provision can be improved by 'supporting the professionalisation of ECEC staff, with an emphasis on the development of their competences, qualifications and working conditions, and enhancing the prestige of the profession'. The 2006 European Commission communication on efficiency and equity in European education and training systems points out the longterm returns of early childhood education and states that 'the supply of specially trained pre-primary teachers will need to be improved in many countries'. The European Quality Framework on ECEC includes two statements focusing on the role played by the ECEC workforce in raising the educational quality of services for young children and improving children's outcomes. Similarly, the OECD Quality Toolbox focuses on working conditions and in-service training and reviews the evidence available linking these two elements with outcomes for children.

Key findings

Evidence on the benefits of CPD

In general it can be concluded that CPD interventions that are integrated into the ECEC centre's practice with a focus on reflection that leads to changes in practice and curricula (feedback component) are effective. For short-term training, intensive intervention with a video feedback component has been found effective in fostering practitioners' competences in care-giving and language stimulation; regarding children's short-term outcomes, there were significant gains in terms of language acquisition and cognitive development.

Long-term CPD interventions integrated into practice, such as pedagogical guidance and coaching in reflection groups, have been proved effective in very different contexts – in countries with a well- established system of ECEC provisions and a high level of qualification requirements for the practitioners, but also as in countries with poorly subsidised ECEC systems and low qualification requirements. Thus, independent of the kind of ECEC system, long-term pedagogical support to staff by specialised coaches or counsellors in reflection groups was found effective in enhancing the quality of ECEC services, as well as in improving children's cognitive and social development.

The impact of CPD interventions on staff-child interactions and outcomes for children might be explained – to a certain extent – by the positive effects that training and its follow-up activities have on practitioners' knowledge, practice and understanding. In particular, long-term CPD initiatives that build upon practitioners' needs and participation are found to be successful in increasing the pedagogical awareness and professional understanding of ECEC staff. By enhancing practitioners' reflectivity both at individual and at team level, CPD activities allow ECEC professionals to strengthen their capacities and address areas for improvement in everyday practices. CPD

interventions can redirect the practitioners' role towards active listening, and can develop a learning orientation towards play discovery and an appreciation of the learning gains for children's spontaneity, curiosity and inventiveness.

Participation in CPD initiatives sustains practitioners' competence in developing, implementing and evaluating ECEC curricula or pedagogical frameworks starting from the needs of the children they are working with. This, in turn, might nurture children's learning more effectively.

In addition, engaging in participatory CPD activities within highly socioculturally diverse ECEC contexts can lead practitioners to reconceptualise their role in parental involvement and to develop more responsive educational strategies. These include, for example, a more welcoming approach that enables parents to engage in a reciprocal dialogue with practitioners and to participate in educational decision-making processes in early childhood settings.

Evidence on the impact of working conditions

Only five studies rated as reliable found that, broadly speaking, staff–child ratio and class size have positive effects on the quality of practitioners' practices and on staff–child interaction. However, the studies adopted different measurements of staff–child ratio and class size and different tools to evaluate their effects on practitioners' practice or their impact on staff–child interactions and children's outcomes. There must, therefore, be concerns about comparability of outcome measures across countries.

Policy pointers

The evidence points to critical factors in CPD intervention.

- CPD is best embedded in a coherent pedagogical framework or curriculum that builds upon research and addresses local needs.
- Practitioners should be actively involved in the process of improving educational practice within ECEC settings.
- CPD needs to be focused on practitioners learning in practice, in dialogue with colleagues and parents, which in turn implies that a mentor or coach should be available during staff's non-contact hours.
- CPD interventions also require changes in working conditions, especially the availability of non-contact time.

Interventions based on research-based enquiry or action research can help staff reflect on their pedagogical practice and so improve it. Those based on documentation or action research can provide the structure to help focus more on children's actual needs. Meanwhile, practice-based research can contribute to raising the quality of ECEC services through the dissemination and exchange of good practice, which in turn might help increase the status of ECEC in the eyes of the public and policymakers.

Intensive CPD programmes with a video feedback component proved to be effective for achieving short-term outcomes in fostering practitioners' competences in care-giving and language stimulation, and regarding outcomes for children there were significant gains in terms of language acquisition and cognitive development. Long-term CPD initiatives accompanied by pedagogical guidance and coaching in reflection groups proved to be effective for enhancing and sustaining the quality of ECEC services over long periods of time; evidence of impact on children's cognitive and social outcomes was also found. Different combinations of CPD delivery modes can be seen not in opposition but rather as complementary, serving different goals in different contexts.

Research on working conditions in Europe is mostly carried out within research designs that – albeit rigorous – might not necessarily comply with the highest standards of systematic reviews: this is a concern that could be brought to the attention of policymakers and researchers when conducting future systematic reviews.

The further elaboration of systematic review procedures that address challenges and the feasibility of reviewing literature in multiple languages might be considered: the richness of research and pedagogical traditions displayed across European Member States definitely calls for increased attention to studies published in languages other than English.

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