



Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

HIGHLIGHTS FROM “RESEARCH BRIEF: QUALIFICATIONS, EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MATTER”

Why do qualifications, education and professional development matter?

- Well-educated, well-trained professionals are the key factor in providing high-quality ECEC with the most favourable cognitive and social outcomes for children. It is, however, not the qualification *per se* that has an impact on child outcomes but the *ability* of better educated and trained staff to create a high-quality pedagogical environment that makes the difference. Research suggests that pedagogical quality includes:
 - A good understanding of child development;
 - The ability to develop children’s perspectives, praise, comfort, question, be responsive, and elicit children’s ideas;
 - Skills for leadership, problem solving and development of lessons plans; and
 - Good vocabulary.
- Well-educated/trained staff is better able to create more effective work environments and increase the efficiency of other ECEC staff members.
- Ongoing professional training maintains the benefits from initial education and allows staff to stay updated on professional developments and best practices, contributing to improved pedagogical and professional quality, and stimulating early child development.

Which aspects matter most?

- **Staff’s ability to stimulate child development** is a determinant factor for quality in early childhood education and care. It can be fostered through the contents and methods of the pre-service and in-service training programmes.
- Generally, a higher **level of initial education** is associated with higher pedagogical quality in ECEC settings and greater academic gains for children. However, it is important to bear in mind that it is not necessary that all staff have high initial levels of education.

- **Specialised education** focusing on early childhood education or child development, beyond general educational attainments, increases the likelihood that practitioners are effective in promoting the educational, socio-emotional and healthy development of children.
- While **initial education** seems to be a stronger predictor of better child development in preschools, **specialised education/training** is more strongly associated with cognitive and social child outcomes of younger children (infants and toddlers).
- In order for staff to maintain their professional quality, they need to engage in **ongoing professional development**, which prevents the effects of initial education from fading out. It has the potential to fill in the knowledge and skills that staff may be lacking or require updating on due to changes in particular knowledge fields.
 - Because ECEC staff come across children with increasingly different social-cultural and family backgrounds, it is important to accommodate this pluralism through including, for example, intercultural pedagogical approaches or language acquisition for immigrant children in training programmes.
 - Staff quality is maintained by leadership of management staff that motivates and encourages team work, information sharing and professional development.
- Highly qualified staff can have a **positive influence on those who work with them** and who do not have the same qualifications.

Policy implications

- Raising qualifications of ECEC practitioners can boost quality provision and provide more stimulating learning opportunities, which yields better academic and social outcomes. However, considering the costs of doing so, it is important to bear in mind that it is not necessary that all staff have the same qualification levels. Of particular importance are the types of education leading to the qualifications.
- Staff with lower levels of initial education could also be given opportunities to enhance their pedagogical quality by working alongside those with higher qualified staff.
- Improving quality provision also requires a broad range of professional development activities. Professional training should be available for all ECEC practitioners and preferably be a requirement to stay or grow in the profession. The key to effective professional development is identifying the right strategies to help practitioners stay updated on pedagogical methods and curriculum subject knowledge while ensuring that staff needs are met.
- Training with a specialised focus on early education or child development is considered beneficial since educating young children requires particular skills and specific content knowledge.

Research gaps

- There is no general consensus on what exactly constitutes quality in ECEC, although quality is often being assessed in research.
- The content of pre-service and in-service staff training remains a point of discussion, and there are concerns regarding the appropriateness of its programme contents, what children should learn (and therefore staff should know), and pedagogical methods.
- The optimal level of staff education and ECEC quality remains unclear as well as the effectiveness of different training strategies.
- There is a need for research on how the management skills of ECEC staff, such as leadership, team work and management skills, can be effectively enhanced through pre-service and in-service training.
- There is a growing interest in research on the effectiveness of including specialised subjects in pre-service and in-service training, such as social and ethnic diversity in ECEC settings, in line with the changes in demographic compositions in many OECD countries.