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Continental workforce

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The Early Childhood Workforce in Europe

The quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are inextricably linked to the quality of the workforce, irrespective of whether constructions of quality are in relation to structural features, such as qualification levels and ratios; process features, like how a member of staff interacts with a child; or a more philosophical stance that considers quality in the plural and the knowledge required for working in ECEC being about knowledge*s*. The connection between the workforce and the quality of a setting has a given logic, irrespective of what any rating scale, inspection or research might say. Those who work in ECEC will shape the pedagogical environment, be involved in the day to day interactions with children and respond to their varying needs. Given the importance of the ECEC workforce for the quality of provision you would assume that there is agreement on what a quality workforce looks like, but in fact the workforce is characterised by its variation.

My interest in quality ECEC and the workforce comes from a perspective of wanting to better understanding the complexities of the knowledges required for delivering quality ECEC. I recognise that quantitative assessments of quality that have highlighted the importance of qualification levels, for example, and have a place in facilitating understandings of quality and the workforce. However, quantitative assessments are limited in their scope, being restricted by features of quality that can be measured. Further, assessments of quality will always be shaped by socio-cultural perspectives on what it is that quality ECEC services are seen to 'do'; the outcomes that are desired. Understandings of quality are never value neutral and whilst it can be easy to criticise quantitative measures for failing to capture the full detail and complexity of quality ECEC, all understandings of quality, and therefore the workforce, will come from an ideological perspective. My own perspective is that often the workforce is reduced down to a qualification level, but what I am interested in is the knowledges that inform those who work with young children. What knowledge comes from a qualification, what comes from experience, what comes from some form of moral imperative and how all of these are combined? And of course I appreciate that all of these are shaped by the regulations and standards that have to be adhered to.

Europe

My current research is focussed on exploring ECEC workforce differences in Europe. Writing about Europe at the current time feels strange as, in the UK, we await to see what relationship we will have with our European neighbours in the future. However, European agendas on ECEC have shifted from a focus on the quantity of places available, primarily driven by equality agendas to support maternal employment, towards a focus on the quality of provision, including the quality of the workforce. The Thematic Working Group for ECEC at the European Commission identified five areas for improving the quality of ECEC: access, workforce, the curriculum, evaluation, monitoring and governance and funding. Under details for the workforce, a well-qualified workforce, with access to professional development opportunities, along with opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents were all identified[i]. The qualifications for ECEC fall under lifelong learning agendas where there is a focus on the "combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context"[ii]. Despite the collective interest in and attention to the ECEC workforce, my intention is to explore firstly the variation in workforce requirements across Europe and secondly conceptions of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Workforce Structures in Europe

ECEC services across Europe inevitably vary as a result of a range of factors, such as the historical development of services; policy recognition, development and investment; understandings of the purpose of services and concepts of children and families. Whilst it is common to refer to ECEC to represent a combined construction of both educating and caring for children, many countries have what is referred to as a split model, whereby there are care services for young children (typically under the age of three) and education services for older children (those of pre-school age). The split model has been presented as problematic not only because it limits understandings of services as being about care or education, rather than a more holistic construct, but also because it implies arbitrary understandings of what a child needs (care for young children, education for older). A split model therefore has consequences for understandings of child development and can also create multiple transitions for the child as they move from childcare to early education and then onto school[iii]. A country is typically described as a split model where the governance of childcare and early education services are divided between different government departments, but I find this definition problematic when we look at the detail of the workforce[iv].

An integrated model is one where there is one government department responsible for both care and education services, with support for this model being based on the potential for joined up policy developments. However, the UK is an interesting case when considering the integrated model. The UK is considered integrated as ECEC services fall under the Department for Education, but if we look at the structure of services we see variations in the requirements for services dependent on whether they are located in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. Further, there are variations dependent on the sector, such as private, voluntary, independent or maintained, which for me suggests little evidence of integration.

For the workforce across Europe, service delivery is more likely to be characterized by variation than integration. Those working in ECEC services have been classified as either Education, Care or Auxiliary (assistant) staff, with countries having different staff combination requirements. For example, the most common in national requirements across Europe is for an Education and Auxillary staff combination, such as Denmark and Austria who have this requirement for those working with younger and older chidlren. However, the classifications of staff are problematic as there is little detail on how a member of staff is defined as being Education or Care and, given the above discussion on models of delivery, I suspect that some staff would object to be classified as either, or. However, in keeping with the classifications that are provided it is evident that Education staff are more likely to have a degree, than other types of staff and assistants are the least likely to be required to have a qualification. The pattern indicates a favouring of higher qualifications for those seen as educators, whislt raising questions of what is the role of assistants and how they obtain the knowledge to fulfill it.

The qualification requirements for those working with younger children are more variable across Europe than those working with older (pre-school) children and this variation between the age groups is also evident when looking at professional development requirements. A number of countries have a duty for professional development, with some tying it to promotion whilst others make it optional, but it is more likely that those working with older children will have a duty for professional development than those working with younger chidlren. The implication is that the requirements for working with younger children tend to be lower than those working with pre-school children and whilst this may represent a

historical focus on pre-school provision, does this mean that younger children do not require the same quality of workforce as older children? For example, in Hungary those working with younger chidlren are required to have a post secondary qualification (although degrees are available) and those working with pre-school children have a degree, with managers and leaders having a Masters. However, in the context of generous maternity leave and few services for younger children it is possible to see how the context impacts on workforce requirements. Iceland and Portugal appear to have the highest standards as both are reported to require a Masters level qualification for Education staff working with both age groups, along with a duty for professional development.

The brief analysis offers some comparisons of the working conditions that those in ECEC services across Europe experience. However, before deciding to move to Iceland, it is worth considering that the analysis does not provide detail on who pays for the qualifications or whether having a Masters means higher salaries, more professional respect and/or autonomy. An analysis of staffing structures is interesting, but what does it really tell us about working in ECEC in another country? As stated, my interest goes beyond qualifications as I am interested in how qualifications help prepare people to work in ECEC service (and how those who do not have to train are prepared), but also the forms of knowledge required for working in ECEC services.

Beyond Qualifications

Following a European literature review of research into the ECEC workforce[v] I have been grappling with what it means to 'know' how to work in ECEC. There are some common themes in regards to identifying a knowledge base, including knowledge on child development, pedagogy (teaching methods, providing appropriate environments and resources), policy requirements, families (and forming relationships with them) and approaches to reflective practice. Whilst some aspects of the knowledge for working in ECEC have been much debated, such as child development, and we could deconstruct all of these forms of knowledge, they appear to represent the start of a shared construction of a knowledge base for ECEC. What I find particularly interesting is the knowledge that extends beyond all of these; under lifelong learning they would be framed as the attitudes for ECEC, but there appears to be a slippage in terminology between attitudes, ethics, ethos and dispositions. Adopting the use of attitude, the knowledge base of someone who works in ECEC includes things such as sensitivity, empathy, respect for others, love, warmth and being emotionally accessible. Often the attitudinal knowledge is seen as being innate, but I would argue that it is culturally constructed and this is evident in European comparisons.

The historical and cultural context of a country is important in shaping those who work with children, not just in regards to how ECEC services have been provided and why (as discussed), but in regards to wider perspectives on children and childhood including what are deemed appropriate emotional responses to children. I will offer an example, form a recent research project that considered the views of students in England and Hungary on the attitudes needed to work with young children[vi]. One finding of the research was the differences in knowing what is the appropriate response to a child falling over? In England students wanted to be able to help children, but questioned if hugs were appropriate. However, in Hungary students discussed being free to go to a child. The research highlighted the influence of the cultural context for informing emotional responses, where love is a core concept in constructions of ECEC services in Hungary as opposed to the child protection culture that English students identified. There was also some evidence that the language available also shaped the ways in

which we talk about working with children and I sometimes wonder whether language limits the ECEC workforce from being able to fully express the complexities of knowledges required for working with children. In particular it is interesting how those undertaking their ECEC training are expected not only to identify with the cultural norms of the 'attitudes appropriate for the context', but to also find ways to express this. European comparisons of ECEC practice can begin to illustrate the different forms of knowing that are important for ECEC and the ways that the workforce come to know how to work with children, providing a starting point for a richer conception of the knowledges for ECEC.

[i] Commission, E. (2014). Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for ECEC: Report of the Working Group on ECEC under the auspices of the European Commission., Eureopean Commission, Brussels

[ii] European Commission. (2007). KEY COMPETENCES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING: European Reference Framework. European Commission, Belgium.

[iii] Lindeboom, G., and Buiskool, B. (2013). Quality in ECEC. European Union, Directorate General for Internal Policies. Policy Department B. Structural and Cohesion Policies. Culture and Education, Brussels.

[iv] All data is taken from: Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat., E. (2014). Key Data on ECEC in Europe 2014 Edition. Publications Office

[v] A full version of the literature review can be found at: https://ececworkforce.wordpress.com/ecec-workforce/knowledge-skills-and-attitudes/

[vi] Campbell-Barr, V., Georgeson, J., and Nagy Varga, A. (2015). "Developing Professional Early Childhood Educators in England and Hungary: where has all the love gone?" European Education, 47(4), 1-19.