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European Early Childhood Education and Care Working Group (ECEC WG)



Peer Learning Activity

Strengthening leadership for quality development and staff retention

22-24 May 2024
Berlin, Germany

SUMMARY

Questions related to this Peer Learning Activity can be addressed to

EAC-WG-ON-ECEC@ec.europa.eu.

To support Member States of the European Union in implementing the 2019 Council Recommendation for high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems¹, and the European Quality Framework for ECEC, the European Education Area Working Group (WG) for ECEC² is working towards identifying best practices and ideas, which can support efficient reforms.

The focus of the European Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC WG) in its current 2024-2025 work cycle is on the staff dimension, and more specifically, on leadership in ECEC. In line with this, the European Commission and the Ministry for Education of Lower Saxony jointly organised the Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on 'Strengthening leadership for quality development and staff retention' that took place between 22-24 May 2024 in Berlin, Germany. The event welcomed 50 participants from 18 countries and 4 organisations.

The PLA offered an opportunity to WG members and guests from Germany to meet face-to-face and discuss the ongoing reforms on how to strengthen leadership for quality development and staff retention in ECEC at all system levels. Participants explored how leadership can be strengthened in this context by raising awareness about the different roles leaders need to fulfil and the importance of sharing responsibilities – at centre and system level – to ensure, support and promote quality development and retain staff in the field of ECEC. The event included a mix of presentations, time for discussion, reflection, and for sharing knowledge and experiences, while also offering an opportunity to all participants to visit an ECEC centre in the area of Berlin. Various practice examples have been shared on effective policy initiatives to sustain leadership in the ECEC sector, and participants explored possibilities and opportunities for further innovation and improvement of leadership at all system levels:

- the setting where early childhood education and care is provided for the children;
- the support structures for leaders at the level of the setting such as counselling and professional development;
- the approaches to quality development through internal and external evaluation, and monitoring;
- the policies setting the legal and financial framework and defining the standards for ECEC.

The guiding questions for the PLA were:

- **Who are the leaders in the different systems across Europe and what are their roles and responsibilities?**
- **What makes leadership effective and successful?**
- **What are models and practices for leadership and collaborative leadership in ECEC across the system levels?**
- **How to recruit, train and motivate leaders in ECEC?**

To provide a thorough thematic overview on the topic of the PLA, two expert presentations were held.

The first one focused on **key considerations for strengthening leadership for quality development and staff retention at all levels of the ECEC system.**

- The presentation outlined the levels of ECEC systems, as well as their associated primary tasks, organisational units, and actors. It was emphasised that children's development must be at the heart of ECEC as a competent system, and in order to operate this system, having competent educational

¹ [EUR-Lex - 32019H0605\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

² [ECEC - EACGroups - EC Public Wiki \(europa.eu\)](#)

staff, competent leaders, competent providers and a support system, guided by competent policymakers, is essential.

- The difference between leadership and management was also highlighted. Whereas leadership means to motivate, inspire and persuade others to realise shared goals, management focuses on ensuring the smooth running of day-to-day work, such as the planning, organisation, coordination, monitoring and controlling of functions, processes and people. Although management is possible without leadership, ensuring pedagogical quality and staff retention require effective leaders.
- Leadership has various dimensions, domains, and forms/styles. Distributed leadership can be understood as brokering, facilitating and supporting the leadership of others, by giving the opportunity to act, decide, and to create to those who are motivated, on the basis of trust. It is a non-hierarchical form of leadership, in which multiple actors collaborate, co-create, and share tasks and responsibilities.
- Concerning staff retention in ECEC, various leadership approaches and tools exist for its improvement, including 1) salutogenic leadership – a form of leadership focusing on the mental, social and physical health and well-being of employees, 2) identity policies, and 3) the familiarisation and onboarding of newcomers. Continuous professional development and career planning were mentioned as being essential to satisfy employees' need to learn and develop, while contributing to social change, quality assurance and development among others.

The second thematic presentation provided **cross-national perspectives on ECEC leaders and leadership support structures with selected findings from the SEEPRO-3 project** which comprises 33 country-specific ECEC workforce profiles.

- As acknowledged by the study, conceptualisations of ECEC leaders, of the knowledge/skills they require, and of the support they need and experience, are all 1) context-specific, 2) located in ECEC systems with differing underpinning cultural beliefs and values, and 3) are deeply rooted in country-specific histories of ECEC, linked to socio-political, philosophical and ethical policy stances.
- There are various leadership contexts at the ECEC system level, and – depending on whether they have one lead ministry, one legal and curricular framework, one main setting type, and a single type of core professional – these can be classified as unitary, part-integrated, federal and devolved, bi-sectoral, and federal and cantonal ECEC systems.
- ECEC centre leaders' job specifications and responsibilities show a great variety across the analysed countries. In general, the responsibilities of centre leaders in the unitary, part-integrated and bi-sectoral system types fall under the four broad categories of 1) pedagogical and programme quality, 2) staff support and staff management, 3) partnerships and collaboration, and 4) strategic management and administration.
- Regarding ECEC leaders' minimum qualification requirements, this is overall not higher than for core practitioners, and most countries in the study do not require additional ECEC leadership-specific qualifications.
- When it comes to working with children alongside leadership and managerial tasks, in most unitary systems this is not common, whereas part-integrated systems show a more mixed picture in this regard, and in bi-sectoral systems this also varies according to sector and setting type.
- Five main categories of leadership support strategies were reported, including 1) designated on-site posts with managerial, pedagogic-thematic, and special needs focus; 2) ECEC pedagogical counsellors / consultants / coordinators; 3) centre-based advisory groups; 4) targeted CPD programmes; and 5) leadership-targeted policy initiatives.
- Overall, leadership in ECEC can be understood as multi-perspectival, complex, socially constructed and transformational, clearly moving away from a hierarchical and linear approach.

In smaller group discussions, participants identified the **diverse support needs of ECEC leaders at the setting level, indicating where this support could be sought from.**

- Leaders need various types of support, such administrative, legal, methodological, pedagogical and moral support, as well as help with managing time and resources, but also training and coaching among others.
- The identified structures and actors that can provide this support include local authorities, social partners, trade unions, interest groups, networks of leaders, providers' specialised support system, but also parents, counsellors, onboarding tools and mentoring among others. The national level in certain contexts is instrumental in improving working conditions, reforming education/qualification systems, and providing support for the ECEC leaders. However, the interplay between the different actors varies across countries and local policy cultures. There is a strong need for a coherent governance structure, as well as for legal, policy and pedagogical frameworks.

The PLA provided the opportunity for **seven country examples** to be presented and discussed. The purpose of delving into the country examples was to identify different ways in which leadership responsibilities could be shared across the levels of the ECEC system by taking into account the different configurations characterising the governance of ECEC provision within and across countries. In this perspective, the country examples looked more specifically into the challenges and opportunities connected to creating a shared vision and distributing leadership responsibilities in complex ECEC ecosystems, by considering:

- Two examples from the **German** context where the governance of ECEC is decentralised at the regional/state level within a system granting a certain degree of autonomy to ECEC providers, while also striving to achieve consistent pedagogical quality by supporting leaders through a coherent framework of public policies and tools for evaluating and improving practices at centre level. The case of quality development in Berlin's ECEC centres implemented by the **Berlin Early Years Institute for Quality Development (BeKi)**, was followed by the approaches of the **Fröbel Group** – a non-public independent provider refinanced by the federal state and present nation-wide in Germany – to quality development, staff retention, and actions for strengthening leadership.
- The example of leadership development in **Ireland** was based on the 'Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare – 2022-2028'. In Ireland, ECEC is mostly provided by the private sector, with providers (private for-profit and not-for-profit) having a high level of autonomy and a lack of extensive support infrastructure in place. In this context, linking public subsidies to career pathways connected to specialised training and diversified leadership roles could be a strategy to increase leaders' capacity while ensuring shared leadership responsibilities within ECEC settings.
- **Portugal's** challenges are related to creating a shared vision of leadership in a complex ecosystem where ECEC is managed within a split system, with provision to 3-5-year-olds being primarily provided within the state education system based on a school clusters model encompassing kindergartens, primary and lower/upper secondary schools. ECEC leadership positions are not formalised in this context due to centralised leadership in the hand of the Head Teacher who oversees a whole school cluster. However, various solutions could be adopted for creating a shared vision of leadership, such as through developing a collaborative leadership structure at the cluster level, the establishment of cross-functional teams, as well as facilitating cross-organisational communication and cross-sectoral collaboration at the municipal level.
- The Finnish and Norwegian examples where ECEC is provided within a unified system that is publicly regulated and funded, with decentralised responsibilities to local authorities. In these examples, a shared vision of distributed ECEC leadership at centre level is explicitly set out in ECEC policy

frameworks. Accordingly, **Norway** presented ECEC leadership and quality in its national strategies, including 1) its 'National Strategy for Raising Staff Competences 2023-2025 – Competences for the Future Kindergarten', and 2) the 'National Strategy for ECEC towards 2030 – Kindergartens for a New Era'. On the other hand, **Finland** shared its approach to leading, evaluating and developing ECEC based on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's national ECEC leadership [evaluation](#). In such contexts, investing in the professionalisation of qualified teachers undertaking leadership roles, as well as into a supportive ECEC quality development infrastructure, is considered strategic to the effective implementation of distributed leadership.

- The **Lithuanian** case focused on how assessing ECEC centre leaders' performance can contribute to improving quality in the sector. Here, ECEC is provided within a unified – and mostly publicly funded system – regulated at the national level but with decentralised responsibilities devolved to local authorities in terms of funding and at the school level in terms of curriculum implementation. In this context, leadership at the school level is distributed among the Head of the ECEC centre and two Deputy heads, the ECEC Council/Board, and the Head of the methodological group. ECEC leadership is also supported at 1) the national level by the ECEC Leaders' Association and the National Agency for Education, and 2) at the local level by municipal educational departments providing support with legal procedures and ongoing quality development processes.

Participants identified a variety of **key policy priorities for organising ECEC leadership**, such as the importance of defining roles and competences for ECEC leadership as well as of defining/developing the necessary quality, capacities, support structures, and competencies. In addition, establishing a competence framework for ECEC leaders as well as external evaluation systems, and ensuring that leaders have the necessary qualifications are also important for providing quality ECEC. ECEC leaders should be consulted about their support needs – while their unknown support needs could be mapped – and more recognition should be given for their work. In country contexts where regulations remain overly complex, there may be a need to streamline/unify these rules.

Some of the **key take aways** highlighted by the participants noted that having a clear shared vision about ECEC services across policymakers, providers, leaders, and mainly those holding responsibilities in ECEC quality, is essential. There is a need for dedicated time and investment to support ECEC leaders, to understand what their work entails, as well as to ensure their wellbeing and professional growth. ECEC leadership should not be about one person, but leaders need a support team. The provision of ongoing support structures/system for ECEC leaders (including deputies) results in various benefits, such as in terms of staff retention. At the same time, it is important to avoid the tension between making the leader role more attractive and improving their professionalisation. Leaders guide and influence pedagogy in positive and important ways, and therefore, they should be enablers in supporting good pedagogy. Distributed leadership exists in a variety of models with significant benefits, and there are also advantages related to the different sizes of settings. Finally, for purposeful and meaningful internal evaluations that support leaders, adequate processes and tools must be ensured.