

The Early Childhood Workforce – a powerful force for scaling-up quality services for young children and their families

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With growing interest in how to improve and scale-up systems that deliver services to families and young children, we need to understand more about the best ways to recruit, train, supervise and support the early childhood workforce. This article introduces the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative, a new global initiative coordinated by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and the Results for Development Institute (R4D).

While not enough is yet known about how to scale-up effective interventions in early childhood (Global Child Development Group, 2011), one thing is clear: the quality of early childhood services, and ultimately the outcomes for children and families, depend on a well-supported and empowered early childhood workforce. Children and families face growing challenges that require a comprehensive approach in designing and implementing programmes, with better integration of services and high professionalism of those working in them.

Appropriate training and support, good recognition and decent working conditions all have positive impacts on the capacity, motivation and practices of early childhood personnel (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2013). Research shows that stimulating environments and high-quality pedagogy are fostered by better-qualified staff, and better-quality pedagogy leads to better learning outcomes (Litjens and Taguma, 2010). This applies not only to preschool teachers, but to home visitors, social workers, community health workers, and others providing broader services to young children and their families (UNESCO, 2015).

However, despite increased policy interest in the early years, greater efforts are still needed to strengthen the professional requirements, preparation and training, composition, recruitment, compensation, diversification, monitoring, and recognition and status of those working with young children and their families (Neuman *et al.*, 2015).

Where are the gaps?

According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (online), the number of pre-primary teachers has increased in all regions, to nearly 9 million in 2013. This growth, however, masks a number of challenges.

Data from nearly 80 low- and middle-income countries indicated that, in nearly one-quarter of countries, fewer than half of all pre-primary teachers were trained to national standards. Even in countries where the majority of pre-primary teachers are trained, national standards vary considerably (ILO, 2012). Early childhood personnel working with children under 3 years of age generally have lower qualifications and training requirements than those dealing with older children, especially in comparison to primary school teachers (Neuman *et al.*, 2015).

Teachers comprise just a fraction of the early childhood workforce. Decades of research have demonstrated that the services provided by home visitors can increase parental well-being and efficacy, and impact child maltreatment and child outcomes (Sethi *et al.*, 2013). Home visitors can reach significant numbers of families, may be viewed as trusted and authoritative, and present an opportune entry point to support parents and young children (Moore *et al.*, 2012). Others who work with young children and families (such as community health and child protection workers, childcare providers) and those who supervise and mentor frontline workers (such as trainers, coaches, programme managers) are also critical members of this workforce.

However, very little is known about those working with families and very young children. The lack of data reflects limited attention to the workforce, a challenge particularly acute for those working in home- and community-based services for children under 3. As shown by the examples in the box overleaf, the data we have suggest that countries around the world are experiencing a range of workforce-related challenges in early childhood.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 underlined the need for a collaborative effort to empower the early childhood workforce, particularly given that target 4.2 calls for access to quality early childhood services for all by 2030¹. Many countries will need to substantially increase the size and quality of the early childhood workforce to reach this target, and there is a need to focus on cost-effective and contextually appropriate strategies to recruit, support, and retain qualified professionals and paraprofessionals to work with young children and families in a range of early childhood services.

The impetus that the SDGs generate for countries and global actors presents a unique opportunity to inform, support and promote the development of policies and programmes that strengthen and support the early childhood workforce.

The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative

A new global initiative, led by a growing partnership coordinated by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and Results for Development Institute (R4D)², seeks to support and empower those who work with families and children under age 8, as well as those who train, supervise and mentor practitioners. There are significant differences worldwide in how early

¹ 'By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education' (Global Goals, online). SDG Targets 3.c and 4.c also accord attention to the recruitment and training of the teaching and health workforce respectively.

² Information about ISSA and R4D is available on their websites, at www.issa.nl and www.r4d.org

Country experiences

In **Malawi**, both the Ministry of Health (MoH) and Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Welfare (MoGCSW) employ community health workers. However, those employed by the MoH focus on health care and nutrition, while those working with the MoGCSW concentrate on child protection and development. Differences in population coverage and uncoordinated work schedules mean that these services – and associated messages about child development – are not delivered in an integrated way. (Phuka *et al.*, 2014)

In 2011, **Colombia** launched a national strategy – ‘De Cero a Siempre’ (‘From zero to forever’) – to provide integrated, high-quality early childhood services to children under 6. However, it would take an estimated 74,000 qualified professionals to cover all the country’s vulnerable children, while only around 7,500 professionals graduate in relevant fields each year. An additional 60,000 untrained mothers currently provide these services at the community level. (Bernal and Carnacho, 2012)

In **Slovenia**, there is a unitary early childhood education and care (ECEC) system, part of the education system. Each preschool class is led by a teacher and a teacher assistant (a position introduced in 1996). Although ECEC settings have been integrated with the education system, preschool teachers continue to have a lower level of education and somewhat lower pay compared with school teachers. Preschool teachers earn on average 3.28 times the minimum wage, while primary school teachers earn 3.4 times the minimum wage; assistants earn around twice the minimum wage. (OECD, 2012)

In **Kenya**, a 2010 mapping of the child protection system found that the public sector employed only 400 children’s officers – less than a third of those needed. Civil society organisations employ similar workers who may fill some of the gaps, but they are unevenly distributed and not always regulated by or even registered with the government. The government responded by recruiting volunteer workers, creating questions around the quality of the service. (McCaffery and Collins, 2013)

childhood services are conceptualised and delivered, how the early childhood workforce is comprised, prepared and supported, and how early childhood policies are developed and implemented (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012; UNESCO, 2007; Oberhuemer *et al.*, 2010; Urban *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative takes a holistic, multi-sectoral approach to bridge gaps in policy and practice and promote high-quality, equitable services in diverse contexts.

Overall, the Initiative works to strengthen four areas essential to workforce development at the level of country systems and policies:

1 Competences and standards

Competences and standards ensure that there are agreed requirements and expectations for what early childhood workers should know and be able to do as well as the core principles guiding their work with young children and their families. This also entails professional profiles of different roles within diverse early childhood services and defining competencies at individual, team, institutional, and systems levels.



△ Photo: Peter de Ruiter / Bernard van Leer Foundation

2 Training and professional development

The early childhood workforce is very diverse, and both pre-service and in-service training opportunities need to be up to date, evidence-based, and linked to practice in order to support a competent workforce. Given the diversity of the workforce, including many volunteers or staff without formal education, it is important to develop career pathways with diverse entry points/levels and a clear progression route.

3 Monitoring and mentoring

Creating systems for continuous feedback and coaching – including through peer-to-peer approaches – is important for ensuring workers receive information they can use to improve their practice on an ongoing basis, and is linked to pathways for career advancement. Data from these experiences should feed into ongoing monitoring efforts for quality assurance and improvement.

4 Recognition of the profession

The level of remuneration, working conditions, and status of the early childhood workforce are poor, even relative to primary teachers, nurses, social workers and other similar professions. Recruitment challenges, high turnover and low morale compromise the quality of provision. There is a need to explore ways to improve the attractiveness and perception of the profession and promote ways to give voice to practitioners in their daily work and in policy discussions, including through collective action.

Activities of the Initiative will include developing an online knowledge hub, conducting country-level studies and global landscape analyses, and coordinating joint learning activities that bring together country representatives and diverse, global experts to address shared challenges.

As countries around the world seek to scale-up early childhood development efforts, there is much for them to learn and share, both within and across regions, concerning the key role played by the workforce in ensuring quality and equity of services. The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative aims to support global and country-level action to support those working for children by establishing the size and scope of challenges facing the workforce; increasing visibility around these challenges and the importance of the workforce; and documenting and disseminating potential solutions for country uptake.

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