European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working group on early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Leadership in ECEC: competences and training

SUMMARY

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Executive summary

Leadership has been recognised as a crucial condition for ensuring the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision since the adoption of the Council Recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care systems (2019)[1]. In this Recommendation, supporting the professionalisation of ECEC staff and leaders is seen as a crucial strategy to improve ECEC quality as:

- it contributes to developing a shared sense of purpose orienting the ECEC practice at the team level,
- it enhances professional activities such as collective reflection, planning, engaging with parents and collaborating with colleagues, thus helping to make pedagogical practices more responsive to the diverse needs of children, families and communities within which such services are placed.

In this sense, ECEC leadership has been recognised as an important element in shaping organisational conditions and operational strategies that are supportive of the continuing professional development of the workforce, with potential benefits for staff motivation and retention.

Although there is a growing policy interest in gaining a better understanding of what ECEC leadership looks like across diverse settings and contexts – and how it can positively impact quality – research on ECEC leadership tends to be rather limited compared with other levels of education. In addition, peer learning across Europe on existing and inspiring initiatives is needed. For this reason, the European Education Area working group on ECEC[2] started exploring the topic of ECEC leadership over the work cycle 2024-2025. The working group adopted the following definitions to guide its work on ECEC leadership:

Leader (head of centre-based ECEC setting): the person who is ultimately responsible for the administrative, managerial and pedagogical leadership of the ECEC centre. As part of the leadership role, centre heads may be responsible for:

- the monitoring of children's well-being, learning and development
- the guidance and supervision of other staff, as well as their involvement in decision-making processes
- contact with parents and guardians
- the planning, preparation and/or carrying-out of pedagogical work in the centre.

Centre leaders may also spend part of their time working with children. In some situations, the leadership role is distributed between a number of staff who may have job titles such as assistant head, senior teacher, deputy leader, etc.

Professional leadership: in an ECEC context, this requires skills, behaviours and competences related to supporting children's care and education, pedagogy, engagement with parents, the local community, staff management and organisation. As with other leadership roles in the education sector, ECEC leaders need to establish a culture and purpose which ensures that high-quality provision is available to all children, and that staff and parents are involved and supported.

This report is the second output of the working group, whose work is summarised in three separate but interrelated thematic reports and one additional output:

[1] EUR-Lex - 32019H0605(01) - EN - EUR-Lex

[2] https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/ECEC

1. '*Leadership in ECEC: an overview of models and practices across Europe*', exploring how ECEC leadership is understood in research and enacted in practice, with specific reference to the functions and tasks associated to centre leadership and to the existing structures of leadership in place;
2. The present report: '*Leadership in ECEC: competences and training*', delving into competence requirements associated to leadership profiles of centre leaders, as well as in existing training programmes and career pathways supporting their professionalisation;
3. '*Leadership for Educational Equity: a Whole-System Approach to Early Childhood Development'* (title tbc) focusing on how to develop a leadership culture whereby ECEC centre leaders are embedded in a well-coordinated governance infrastructure at local/regional level, supporting a systematic inter-agency cooperation across the education, social and health sectors;
4. A *reflection tool to organise leadership in ECEC.*

This second report describes the **reality of ECEC centre leaders** in Europe, who form a very heterogeneous group. Their roles vary widely: from self-employed childminders and heads of small centres to leaders managing multiple settings, or even leaders of primary schools. Also, the leadership structures differ: some settings have a single leader who also works as a childcare worker, while others distribute leadership responsibilities among a number of staff.

Although the structures differ significantly, **many ECEC centre leaders face similar challenges**, such as rather low salaries, administrative burdens, resource constraints (e.g. staff shortages), unclear roles, etc. ECEC leadership is clearly a very demanding job, and not all leaders feel either prepared or supported. This might make the profession seem unattractive and lead to a shortage of ECEC centre leaders in many European countries.

To overcome the challenges related to ECEC centre leadership, the working group proposes a competence profile for ECEC centre leaders. The aim of this competence profile is to serve as a flexible guide for regional, local and national levels, based on the following definition:

A competence profile for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) leaders outlines the key competences (including skills, practices, values, knowledge, and attitudes) required for effective leadership in high-quality, inclusive early childhood settings.

Depending on specific contexts, some competencies may be emphasised more than others, and the competencies required may be shared between several persons (in line with the concept of distributed leadership presented in the working group's first report).

Defining a competence profile for ECEC leaders can serve multiple purposes:

- **quality and inclusion**: set clear expectations for leadership that supports equity and child well-being
- **leadership development**: support recruitment, training and professional development
- **public trust**: enhance confidence in leadership roles
- **policy alignment**: ensure consistency with quality standards
- **operational efficiency**: guide hiring, performance evaluation and career development of ECEC centre leaders.

Designing a competence profile was, however, not without its **challenges**. These relate primarily to the complexity of the different systems between European countries, but also

within the different countries, the contextual diversity, the diverse roles of ECEC centre leaders, and the difficulty of evaluating soft skills.

It is therefore important to stress the following **key principles** when designing a competence profile. Such a profile should be:

- **context-specific** and adaptable to local or national structures and realities
- **aligned with the EU quality framework** and grounded in values of inclusion, equity, and holistic child development
- **systemic in scope**, covering both competences and training/qualification needs
- **flexible and avoid overly prescriptive detail**
- **based on a collaborative, bottom-up approach** involving all stakeholders (i.e. governing bodies, ECEC practitioners and centre leaders, researchers, trainers, professional associations and unions, families and communities, and international bodies).

The ECEC working group agreed that a competence profile for ECEC leaders would be useful and discussed the set of competences to be included in such a profile. The working group **proposes a competence profile of ECEC leaders**, structured around seven key areas, including leadership in pedagogy, staff management, inclusion, collaboration, and organisational development. It is intended as a **guiding framework**, adaptable to different definitions of leadership, setting sizes, and local or national priorities.

TOPIC	*DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE*
1. Leadership and management	
Visionary leadership	Ability to develop and communicate a clear vision for high-quality ECEC and build an organisational culture in line with this vision
Strategic thinking	Proficient in planning, setting goals and organising resources to achieve objectives aligned with the vision
Decision-making	Confident and ethical in making informed, timely decisions under pressure
Change management	Ability to lead staff and families through changes and follow through on decisions
Quality assurance and development	Proficient in leading quality development processes and anchoring them in systematic processes, including through internal and external evaluation
Resource management	Skilled in managing budgets, facilities and staffing to ensure a sustainable and efficient provision of high-quality ECEC
Regulatory compliance	Knowledge of and ability to apply (local / regional / national / international) ECEC policies, standards and legal requirements, including child protection, health, safety and safeguarding protocols
2. Pedagogy	
Early childhood development	Knowledge of child development theories, children's rights and best practices of working with 0-6 year olds

Curriculum design and implementation	Knowledge of ECEC regional or national curricula; competence in planning, designing, evaluating and adapting pedagogic activities to meet diverse needs and listening to children's voices; ability to lead the team to implement the curriculum
Assessment and evaluation	Knowledge of planning, implementing and analysing the assessment of children's development, in the best interest of the child
3. Interpersonal communication	
Relationship building	Ability to build and maintain positive relationships with diverse children, staff, families and community stakeholders
Effective communication	Oral, written and digital communication skills, with the ability to mediate conflicts and provide constructive feedback
Empathy and emotional intelligence	Ability to understand and respond to the emotional and social needs of children, families and staff
4. Team management	
Staff supervision and development	Skilled in recruiting, mentoring, coaching, enabling needs assessment and professional development for staff; listening and supporting initiatives from the team; empowering staff and supporting distributed leadership
Team collaboration	Ability to foster trust and a collaborative culture and to encourage teamwork among staff, as well as a culture of feedback and reflection
Conflict resolution	Proficient in resolving workplace conflicts to maintain a positive and productive environment
5. Diversity and inclusion	
Cultural competence	Sensitive to the diverse cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds of children, families and staff
Equity focus	Committed to fostering an inclusive environment that promotes equity and respect for all; knowledgeable about providing resources and adaptations for children and staff with special, needs, additional needs or disabilities
6. Professionalism and ethics	
Ethical leadership	Adherence to ethical standards, professional codes of conduct and children's rights
Reflective practice	Commitment to ongoing self-reflection and improvement
Commitment to lifelong learning	Commitment to continuous professional development and keeping up to date with trends in ECEC

7. Community engagement	
Family partnerships	Actively involve families, respecting their role as primary educators, and securing their rights of participation
Community collaboration	Build strong partnerships to work in an integrated way with other educational institutions (e.g. between 0-3 and 3-6 ECEC settings, or with primary schools), community organisations and services to support children and families, and ease transitions throughout the entire ECEC phase
Public relations	Skilled in representing the ECEC setting and promoting its values and mission effectively

Subsequently, the report describes several **examples** of national or local competence profiles of ECEC leaders from Estonia, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Ukraine and Belgium.

After stressing the importance of clear competence descriptions, the report focuses on the **qualification requirements** for ECEC centre leaders. Although there are some variations among European countries, in general, ECEC centre leaders are highly qualified, and there are some additional requirements in place (e.g. previous professional requirements and specific training on leadership).

Next to the initial requirements, **training programmes and continuing professional development (CPD)** are required for ECEC centre leaders to enhance their complex role and professional motivation and lead to less retention, helping to address the leadership shortage. **Core points of effective CPD** are practice-based training, tailored to their actual role, individual coaching, mentoring, job shadowing and supervision, along with peer support in professional learning communities, overcoming the barriers of limited time, a lack of staff and the high costs.

Ideally, a systemic approach should be in place to support ECEC centre leaders with:

- **a clear competence profile**
- **clear qualification requirements**
- **strong initial training**
- **effective CPD pathways with ongoing mentoring and coaching (both individual as well as peer support), leading towards collaborative leadership cultures**
- **policy alignment across all levels of ECEC.**